

A FUNDAMENTAL DISAGREEMENT:  
ONGOING DISCUSSIONS CONCERNING THE ADAPTATION OF  
AUGUSTO BOAL'S METHODS

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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After Augusto Boal passed away in 2009, a significant dispute developed within the Theatre of the Oppressed community concerning whether his methods should be reimagined to combat structural oppression more effectively. There are some theatre practitioners, most notably Marc Weinblatt and Cheryl Harrison, who have advocated for recalibrating Theatre of the Oppressed for privileged participants to help them recognize their role in continuing oppression. However, there are others, like Dr. Tania S. Cañas, who contend that this goes against the liberationist attitude at the heart of Boal's theatrical praxis. Accordingly, this thesis will contextualize this argument by analyzing these authors' texts and situating them within the movement's larger discourse. Specifically, it considers their articles in relationship to Boal's original writings and the work of other leading artists. In doing so, this discourse strives to elucidate how the theatre praxis's ongoing reconceptualization has been integral for facilitating political and social activism.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Since Augusto Boal passed away in 2009, there has been a growing rift within the Theatre of the Oppressed community concerning whether his methods should be adapted to better serve disparate communities. While the debate surrounding the alteration of Boal's practices surfaced as early as the 1970s, it greatly intensified in 2011 after Marc Weinblatt, along with his contributor Cheryl Harrison, wrote an article entitled "Theatre of the Oppressor" (which was subsequently included in the anthology *Come Closer: Critical Perspectives on Theatre of the Oppressed*.) In the piece, the two discuss their work with the Mandala Center of Change (located in Port Townsend, Washington) and how they have employed theatre to generate community dialogue regarding issues of social justice. Moreover, they explain why they have become advocates for repurposing Theatre of the Oppressed for privileged participants as a tool to help them recognize their role in continuing oppression. However, in 2020, Dr. Tania S. Cañas wrote a counter article entitled "A Continued Theatre of the Oppressed," which appeared in the *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*. In her rebuttal, she ardently disagreed with Weinblatt's and Harrison's modification of Boal's methods. In particular, she contended that their approach elides the original intent of Theatre of the Oppressed by potentially decentering the marginalized (e.g., groups of people that have been relegated to a powerless position). Additionally, Cañas argues this method is fundamentally at odds with the liberationist attitude underpinning all of Boal's practices.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze this ongoing argument by situating the articles of Weinblatt/ Harrison and Cañas within the larger discourse of the movement.



Accordingly, it considers their texts in relation to Boal's original writings and the work of other leading artists within the field. In doing so, this thesis seeks to investigate the areas in which there is general agreement while also highlighting where there are points of departure. Similarly, this discourse will explore the numerous iterations of Theatre of the Oppressed that are in existence today and delineate how these practices have continued to develop over time. In turn, it aims to showcase that Boal's methods were always designed to be pliable and are capable of being employed in a multitude of contexts. Perhaps even more critically, though, this thesis strives to elucidate how the constant reconceptualization of his exercises has been integral for facilitating political and social activism, and it is a significant reason why Theatre of the Oppressed continues to remain relevant today.

Chapter Two examines the complicated history of Theatre of the Oppressed and what initially influenced Augusto Boal to envision this revolutionary type of theatre. It also describes the principal exercises conceived by Boal throughout his lifetime and the various purposes they are intended to serve. Chapter Three begins by laying out the primary arguments made by Weinblatt/Harrison and Cañas in their respective articles. It then considers whether Theatre of the Oppressor should be characterized as a form of appropriation. Additionally, it attempts to provide some additional context to this discussion by exploring how Boal encouraged the continual adaptation of his practice through his unique training method. Finally, Chapter Four discusses some of the leading Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners and organizations currently working with Boal's methods to see how others have contended with the complicated issue of privilege. Additionally, it examines whether there is indeed a set of best practices for facilitating

this kind of work and other forms of theatre for social change. It also contemplates the potential applications for Theatre of the Oppressed in the future. Finally, Chapter Five summarizes the major points addressed throughout the thesis.

## CHAPTER II

### OVERVIEW OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Theatre of the Oppressed (commonly abbreviated as TO) is a theatrical movement created by the celebrated Brazilian theatre practitioner and politician Augusto Boal. This collection of participatory performance techniques was initially developed out of his work with underprivileged communities during his tenure at the Arena Theatre (or Teatro de Arena in Portuguese) of São Paulo.<sup>1</sup> Unlike more conventional forms of theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed attempts to dissolve the perceived divide between performers and the audience by inviting everyone to contribute to the theatre-making process. In doing so, it seeks to transform the audience from merely passive spectators to more active creators (or, as they are frequently referred to, spect-actors). Theatre of the Oppressed accomplishes this task by reconceptualizing common aspects of theatre, such as role-playing and the barrier of the aesthetic space, to better meet its participants' requirements. More specifically, it provides them with the opportunity to enact their personal stories of oppression and discuss the possible ways to bring about a more equitable future for themselves and their community. These types of embodied performances, in turn, are intended to help marginalized people envision new social and political realities, which is why Boal routinely described the process as a "rehearsal for change."<sup>2</sup> Today, Theatre of the Oppressed practices have become ubiquitous throughout

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Paterson, "A Brief Biography of Augusto Boal," *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed*, accessed December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, <https://ptoweb.org/aboutpto/a-brief-biography-of-augusto-boal/>.

<sup>2</sup> Aleks Sierz, "Augusto Boal: Brazilian Director and Dramatist Who Believed Theatre Should Be a Force for Radical Change," *The Guardian*, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, <https://www.the-guardian.com/world/2009/may/06/augusto-boal-obituary>.

the world; they are performed in numerous countries as a means of social revolution by empowering disenfranchised people to fight back against structures of oppression. However, while the history of Theatre of the Oppressed is fascinating in its own right, this section does not aim to chronicle the entire development of the theatrical movement. Instead, it strives to showcase that Boal created his theatrical praxis through incremental steps and to reiterate its dynamism.

### The Development of Theatre of the Oppressed

The antecedents of Theatre of the Oppressed first materialized in the late 1950s when Boal returned to Brazil from the United States, where he studied theatre and chemical engineering at Columbia University. Shortly after his arrival, Boal began working as a director for the fledgling Arena Theatre (he would later replace the company's founder, José Renato, as artistic director in 1962). Serving in this capacity, Boal sought to challenge traditional theatrical conceptions to create a type of performance that would speak to Brazil's tumultuous political climate. At the same time, he also endeavored to supplant the European concept of theatre (or, as Boal preferred to call it, "bourgeois theatre") that had dominated the country for decades.<sup>3</sup> The initial impetus for Theatre of the Oppressed derived from Boal's recognition that theatre modeled after European sensibilities, which he felt was highly dogmatic and stratified, had little relevance to Brazil's emerging working class and its perennially impoverished communities. The principal explanation he gave for this was that these types of

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<sup>3</sup> Priscila Matsunaga, "Arena Theatre, Brazil, Boal: Between Farces and Allegories," in *The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed*, ed. Kelly Howe, Julian Boal, and José Soeiro (New York City, New York; Routledge Publishing, February 12th, 2019): 35 - 36.

performances were largely unreflective of most Brazilian people's life experiences, nor did they necessarily speak to their concerns and aspirations. In Boal's opinion, the traditional divide between the audience and performers in conventional theatre only served to pacify the subjugated and reinforce the ideals of the socially elite. Accordingly, he contended that it was a form of oppression that had to be done away with, or at the very least drastically altered.

The break from conventional theatre in Brazil during the 1950s coincided with the rise of revolutionary political ideology that was taking place at the time. During the mid-twentieth century, the country experienced a significant amount of upheaval as several populist presidents were disposed of and Brazilian nationalism intensified. The political situation was exacerbated by the growing dissatisfaction towards the country's longstanding social and economic inequities, despite the rapid industrial growth during the decade.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Arena Theatre became closely aligned with the insurgent political movements of the day. This association was further strengthened by its show selection, which emphasized an eclecticism of theatrical styles. Furthermore, after Boal began working with the Arena Theatre as a director, they predominately focused on staging nationalized adaptations of classics (altering the settings to be more localized and performed in common vernacular) and agitprop plays that addressed the divisive issues within Brazilian society. In particular, the company gravitated towards theatre that depicted the struggle of the lower class and their often disheartening living conditions.

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<sup>4</sup> Rafael R. Ioris, "'Fifty Years in Five' and What's in It for Us? Development Promotion, Populism, Industrial Workers and *Carestia* in 1950s Brazil," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Cambridge, England; Cambridge University Press, May 31, 2012): 261-284.

However, this crude realism became increasingly arduous to produce after the 1964 Brazilian civil-military coup, which supplanted the previous democratic government. Upon taking control of the country, the new authoritarian military regime enacted a more severe form of censorship.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the Arena Theatre began to shift its focus towards less overtly political plays and more experimental work.

One of Augusto Boal's most substantial projects with the Arena Theatre was the 1965 production of *Arena Conta Zumbi* (or *Arena Tells About Zumbi*). It was the first production in a more extensive series of musical/protest performances, all of which shared the *Arena Conta* (*Arena Tells About*) designation. *Arena Conta Zumbi* was consequential for many reasons, perhaps the most significant of which was its provocative subject matter.<sup>6</sup> The story of *Arena Conta Zumbi* revolves around a historic (and somewhat fictionalized) hero from Brazil named Zumbi, or Zumbi dos Palmares. Zumbi was a Quilombo leader who is celebrated today for leading a liberation force that freed hundreds of African slaves during the seventeenth century. While the play is seemingly historical on its surface (which allowed it to circumvent censorship when it was first performed), it was meant to serve as a commentary on the 1964 civil-military coup and the growing rise of fascism in Brazil. *Arena Conta Zumbi* was also a touring production, and it traveled throughout Brazil's rural and impoverished northern provinces, providing numerous free performances in public venues. The show's

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<sup>5</sup> Oscar Fernández, "Censorship and the Brazilian Theatre," *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 25, no. 3 (Baltimore, Maryland; John Hopkins University Press, October, 1973): 285 – 298. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/32056>.

<sup>6</sup> David George Sanderson, *The Modern Brazilian Stage* (Austin, Texas; University of Texas Press, 1992): 42 – 55.

production model resulted from Boal's concerted effort to expand theatre to a broader audience in Brazil; he wanted to make the art form more accessible to the country's disenfranchised citizens, many of which did not have the means to pay for the standard admission price.

The experimentations that took place within *Arena Conta Zumbi*, and to a more considerable extent the entire *Arena Conta* series, were important because they drastically altered how Augusto Boal approached making theatre. According to Boal in his famous book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, *Arena Contra Zumbi's* "... fundamental aim was the destruction of all the theatrical conventions that had become the obstacles to esthetic development of the theatre."<sup>7</sup> This deconstructive attitude towards theatre served as the theoretical foundation for Boal's subsequent investigations, and it clearly informs much of his methods. Theatre of the Oppressed is unconventional compared to other theatrical movements because it never presents itself as a finished concept. Rather, it acknowledges that it is an evolving praxis that needs to be frequently adapted and amended to include new ideas and exercises. In other words, for Theatre of the Oppressed to function correctly and meet its participants' specific needs, it has to be continuously informed by practice.

Unfortunately, Augusto Boal's crucial work with the Arena Theatre was interrupted in 1971 when the Brazilian military dictatorship imprisoned him for four months (during which he was severely tortured). Boal was targeted by the government because of his plays' subversive nature, as the government felt they were advocating for

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<sup>7</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York City, New York; Theatre Communications Group, 1985): 166.

insurrection. In particular, his use of Newspaper Theatre, a performance technique where actors reenacted the news stories of the day to better inform the audience (which is greatly indebted to the Living Newspaper of the Federal Theatre Project), greatly angered them.<sup>8</sup> They found Newspaper Theatre dangerous because it prompted Brazilian audiences to recognize how their media was censored and that their government was deeply corrupted. Boal was eventually released from prison, although he was exiled from Brazil and could not return home for fifteen years. Despite this setback, he continued expanding on his theatrical theories, working in other South American countries such as Peru and Argentina. Additionally, it was also during this period of exile that Boal wrote the previously mentioned and highly influential book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which brought him international attention and acclaim for the first time.<sup>9</sup>

After spending just under five years in other South American countries, Boal elected to leave for Europe, as these governments were not particularly appreciative of his revolutionary theatre as well.<sup>10</sup> After a two-year stay in Portugal, he finally settled in Paris in 1977. Here, Boal continued directing plays and resumed leading theatrical workshops at the prominent Sorbonne University. Additionally, in 1979 he founded a Theatre of the Oppressed group within the city (known today as Théâtre de l'Opprimé). Two years later, in 1981, he established the first International Theatre of the Oppressed

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<sup>8</sup> John W. Casson, "Living Newspaper: Theatre and Therapy," *The Drama Review*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Summer, 2000): 107-122. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146850>.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Weber, "Augusto Boal, Stage Director Who Gave a Voice to Audiences, is Dead at 78," *The New York Times*. May 9, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/09/theater/09-boal.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Doug Paterson, "A Brief Biography of Augusto Boal," *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed*, accessed December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020. <https://ptoweb.org/aboutpto/a-brief-biography-of-augusto-boal/>.



Festival. During his stay in Europe, Boal also traveled to other countries in Europe, Asia, and North America, setting up numerous Theatre of the Oppressed centers. Many of these are still in practice today and are situated in disparate countries such as the United States, India, and Germany. Although Boal could not return to Brazil for such a prolonged period, his extensive travels undoubtedly helped to bolster his profile and expedited his practices across the world. Moreover, by utilizing Theatre of the Oppressed in a multitude of settings (outside of just South American countries such as Brazil and Argentina), he showcased that his methods were broadly applicable.

After the dissolution of Brazil's military dictatorship in 1986, Boal finally returned to his native country after more than fifteen years of exile. Upon his arrival, he established The Center for the Theater for the Oppressed in the capital city of Rio de Janeiro (or more commonly abbreviated, CTO Rio), which has been one of the leading Theatre of the Oppressed centers in the world for decades. With this organization's support, Boal continued investigating how theatre could address issues of oppression and, ultimately, be of better service to people. Undoubtedly, his most substantial innovation with CTO Rio was the inception and development of Legislative Theatre, a Theatre of the Oppressed technique that is intended to affect governments by brainstorming actual laws.<sup>11</sup> When Boal later became a city councilor for Rio de Janeiro in 1992, he made extensive use of Legislative Theatre to help devise new measures that were later ratified into law. In many ways, Legislative Theatre was the culmination of what Boal initially set out to accomplish with Theatre of the Oppressed. The reason for this is that the

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<sup>11</sup> Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics*, trans. Adrian Jackson (New York City, New York; Routledge, 1998): 6- 18.

technique not only allows people to use theatre as a means of education but also to inspire them to support meaningful changes in society.

Boal continued to develop and revise aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed for the remainder of his life, and he was a strong proponent for his practices being employed in new contexts. Boal left political office in 1996 (having lost his reelection bid), but he resumed performing his exercises with different groups throughout Brazil. For instance, one of his most notable workshops took place with convicted prisoners in São Paulo. He also remained active abroad, participating in numerous classes at Theatre of the Oppressed centers and academic institutions. Additionally, he supported and spoke at multiple Theatre of the Oppressed conferences, most notably the annual Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference. Boal's primary objective in attending these events was to teach others his methods and to make them available to the broadest amount of people possible. He also strove to train a core group of practitioners who could continue with his life's work. At the same time, though, he encouraged them to expand on his concepts by exploring new ways theatre could bring about solidarity and dialogue amongst all people, which is arguably what Weinblatt and Harrison have attempted to accomplish in creating Theatre of the Oppressor.<sup>12</sup>

### Influences on Theatre of the Oppressed

The purpose of discussing the inspirations for Theatre of the Oppressed is to elucidate how Boal first conceptualized the practice. Furthermore, by delineating the process through which the praxis was initially created, it becomes easier to recognize that

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<sup>12</sup> Augusto Boal, "Augusto Boal, Founder of Theatre of the Oppressed, Dies at 78," interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now*, May 6th, 2009, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rkVD\\_Oln7g&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rkVD_Oln7g&feature=emb_title).

the theatrical movement has always been open to new ways of working and continual innovation. First, it is essential to note that the Theatre of the Oppressed's development was greatly influenced by two men, Paulo Freire and Bertolt Brecht. The former, Paulo Freire, was a renowned Brazilian educator and writer. He was also a mentor and friend of Boal's for many years (although they only worked together in an official capacity once). Freire's seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* served as a significant motivation for much of Augusto Boal's work, evidenced by their shared usage of the term oppressed. In the book, Freire stressed that there should be a dialogic exchange between educators and students. For Freire and Boal, their definition of dialogic derives from Marxist Theory, and it refers to dialogue's interactive and responsive nature rather than a didactic monologue. Additionally, Freire felt that education could and should be an emancipatory praxis that contributes to ongoing social liberation. In many ways, Boal strove to expand on his mentor's initial pedagogical concepts by reconceptualizing theatre as both a form of education and a means to generate societal progress.

The influence of Bertolt Brecht, the widely known German theatre practitioner and theorist, on the Theatre of the Oppressed can also be seen in Augusto Boal's exercises and his general mindset towards performance. For instance, many of Brecht's concepts, such as the alienation effect (or distancing effect), informed much of Boal's early theatrical investigations. Like Brecht, Boal strongly desired to move away from cathartic theater (or, as he often referred to it, "Aristotelian Theatre").<sup>13</sup> Brecht, in a similar manner to Boal and Freire, relied heavily on Marxist Theory to shape his theories

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<sup>13</sup> Andy McLaverty-Robinson, "Augusto Boal: Brecht and Beyond – The Boal Method," *Ceasefire*, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/augusto-boal-brecht-boal-method/>.

and aesthetic practices. For example, like many Marxists, Brecht believed that people's attitudes and behaviors are greatly influenced by their environment and their specific historical situation.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, instead of asking the audience to identify with the actors on stage, he often challenged them to forgo empathizing with the characters and recognize that social factors typically drive their choices. An analogous attitude permeates throughout Theatre of the Oppressed, as Boal also maintained that social and political structures have a tremendous influence on the way people think of themselves and how they treat others. Apart from the alienation effect, there are several other aspects of Brecht's theories that are apparent in Boal's work. For example, like Brecht, Boal often incorporated music into his productions and, towards the latter half of his career, he routinely sought to emphasize the artificiality of theatre.

### The Tree of Theatre of the Oppressed

Before discussing how Theatre of the Oppressed practices are being applied today, it is essential to have a fundamental understanding of the various exercises that comprise the theatrical movement. There are numerous methods created by Augusto Boal that fall underneath the umbrella of Theatre of the Oppressed, many of which are offshoots of earlier techniques. For this reason, Boal often utilized the image of a tree to represent the complicated relationship between the various exercises and showcase how it is a continually growing praxis. Some of the principal practices that comprise Theatre of the Oppressed and may be familiar to readers are Forum Theatre, Legislative Theatre, Invisible Theatre, Image Theatre, Newspaper Theatre, and, finally, the Rainbow of

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic: The Korsch Connection," in *Bertolt Brecht: Political Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. Betty Nance and Hubert Heinen (Athens, Georgia; University of Georgia Press, 1980): 29–42.

Desire.<sup>15</sup> While each of them is unique in its own right, the central tenet they all share is that each strives to create a reciprocal interaction between the performers and the audience. Additionally, there is no scripted work in all iterations of Theatre of the Oppressed, nor a clearly demarcated director. Moreover, the performances rarely have a prescriptive resolution that is meant to educate. Instead, participants are encouraged to think critically and to consider different tactics to confront the problems brought up during the performances. Finally, it is crucial to keep in mind that this is not meant to be an exhaustive list of all the Theatre of the Oppressed practices. The exercises discussed in this section simply speak to the fact that there are many potential applications for Boal's theories and exercises.

As mentioned previously, *Arena Conta Zumbi* was a pivotal production in Augusto Boal's artistic career. Apart from the play's subject matter and its unique production model, *Arena Conta Zumbi* was also noteworthy because it marked the emergence of the Joker System (although it was first fully realized in *Arena Conta Tiradentes*), a central principle of Theatre of the Oppressed.<sup>16</sup> The name derives from the joker playing card, which, according to Boal, has the most flexibility out of any other card in the deck. The Joker System is equally adaptive because it requires actors to portray numerous characters in the play. This performative technique was at least partially inspired by ancient Greek theatre and Bertolt Brecht's theories regarding the

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<sup>15</sup> Augusto Boal, "The Arsenal of Theatre of the Oppressed," in *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (New York City, New York; Routledge Publishing, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Augusto Boal, "The Joker System: An Experiment by the Arena Theatre of São Paulo," *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Winter, 1970): 91-96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1144533>.

alienation effect. However, unlike the former theatrical style, the Joker system does not utilize masks in the traditional sense. Instead, it relies on what Boal often described as “social masks.” This term refers to the mechanized and patterned behavior that we tend to exhibit in real life, which Boal felt was greatly influenced by our profession and social status.<sup>17</sup> The Joker System's ultimate purpose is to help members of the audience recognize the character as an artificial construct or, more simply, an object created by the author. In turn, this allows spectators to analyze what is being presented to them on stage in a more critical manner.

It was also from the Joker System that the similarly named position of the Joker first originated. In Theatre of the Oppressed, there is no director or artistic leader in the traditional sense, as Boal believed that the inclusion of such a hierarchical position would further exacerbate the inequity that had become commonplace in theatre. For this reason, Boal created the Joker, a kind of facilitator who guides the performers through the various exercises and leads the ensuing discussions amongst the participants. Ultimately, this person is responsible for selecting what practices are utilized in the workshop and providing an overall structure to the event. However, this is not to suggest that the role is intended to be entirely didactic. Instead, the Joker should be thought of as a resource, a highly trained individual who draws upon their experience and knowledge to proffer techniques that they believe will be the most conducive for the participants in telling their stories. Jokes are not supposed to overly shape Theatre of the Oppressed performances or

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<sup>17</sup> Ebru Gökdağ, “Augusto Boal’s The Joker System,” *Idil Journal of Art and Language*, vol. 3, no. 14 (Turkey; Sada Institute, 2014), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284380879\\_AUGUSTO\\_BOAL'S\\_THE\\_JOKER\\_SYSTEM](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284380879_AUGUSTO_BOAL'S_THE_JOKER_SYSTEM).

implement an artistic vision like a traditional director. Ultimately, it is the participants who are responsible for this.

Another excellent representation of Theatre of the Oppressed's unique praxis was the creation of Forum Theatre. In short, Forum Theatre is a problem-solving technique that presents an unresolved scene of oppression on stage and, subsequently, asks the audience to improvise solutions to the problem. Much like the Joker System, Forum Theatre developed from the insight Boal gained during the *Arena Conta* series. In the early years of the Arena Theatre, the company frequently held talkback sessions after their performances, which were meant to help facilitate discussion of political and social issues amongst the audience. However, the company began to reconsider this practice after a particularly tense interaction with an audience member. After a performance in which the actors urged the audience to violently rebel against the Brazilian government, a local peasant named Virgilio tried to persuade the performers to join him in armed revolt.<sup>18</sup> Boal then had to explain to the man that this was merely part of the play and that they had no intention of actually fighting, which greatly perturbed him. Although this audience member gave Boal the kind of passionate reaction he was looking to generate with theatre, it did not manifest itself in the way he initially envisioned.

Although the exchange between Augusto Boal and Virgilio was heated, it became a pivotal moment for Boal because it forced him to realize that his approach was flawed; he saw that while his work was well-intentioned, it was ultimately too prescriptive to truly create social change. In many ways, this interaction served as the motivation for the continued evolution of Theatre of the Oppressed, as it helped Boal recognize that he was

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<sup>18</sup> Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson (New York City, New York; Routledge Publishing, 1995): 2-3.

attempting to provide solutions to these communities' problems without taking into account their perspectives and ideas. Consequently, he started to develop a more participatory approach to theatre, one that encouraged a sense of empowerment among its audience by truly engaging them in the creative process and providing them with an expressive medium. In a sense, this early realization by Boal also speaks to the current debate surrounding the adaptation of Theatre of the Oppressed. Namely, it raises the question of whether or not Marc Weinblatt's and Cheryl Harrison's Theatre of the Oppressor is trying to resolve the issues faced by marginalized people without adequately incorporating them into their performances.

One of Augusto Boal's most meaningful innovations during his exile was the refinement of Forum Theatre. In particular, his decision to ask audience members to interact directly with the performances as they took place, rather than wait for the discussion period afterward, was critical. Over time, Boal started having the actors perform a scene of oppression twice and then allowed the spectators to stop the actors during the second run if it felt disingenuous or improbable. While the performance was paused, he encouraged the audience members to suggest or demonstrate different actions for the character (or protagonist) experiencing oppression. The actor portraying the character would then carry out their suggestions (a practice referred to as "simultaneous dramaturgy"). However, if the actor could not adequately perform the scenario, an audience member could also choose to replace them and enact it themselves.<sup>19</sup> This exercise was inspired by a woman in Peru, who, after growing impatient with an actor's

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<sup>19</sup> Augusto Boal, "Forum Theatre: Harvard Presentation," for Cultural Agents and Harvard University (first recorded in 2003, published August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I71sLJ-j5LE>.



inability to perform her request the way she had envisioned it playing out, got up on stage and acted the scene out herself.<sup>20</sup> By implementing this more hands-on approach, Boal wanted to break down the traditional barrier between the audience and the performers and put them on more equal footing. While this change may seem relatively small, it was a pivotal departure from Boal's earlier work. Unquestionably, this discovery served as a guiding principle for much of Theatre of the Oppressed and its various iterations.

Although Forum Theatre is perhaps the most well-known of Augusto Boal's practices, many other lesser-known games are included within Theatre of the Oppressed. For instance, there is Image Theatre, a technique that requires participants to arrange one another into static images of oppression. Typically, this exercise requires one person to mold others into these representations without speaking to them. Afterward, the spect-actor is forced to confront their constructed images and conceptualize real or fictional scenes that can counterpose the ones they initially created. While Image Theatre may seem somewhat similar to Forum Theatre on the surface, the critical difference is that the exercise calls upon the spect-actors to imagine rather than enact change.<sup>21</sup>

Another critical form of Theatre of the Oppressed is Invisible Theatre. This technique is a type of performance that occurs in public areas where people do not usually expect to see theatre. Invisible Theatre's name refers to the fact the audience is often unaware that they are watching a theatrical event, and they often engage with the

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Taussig, Richard Schechner, and Augusto Boal, "Boal in Brazil, France, the USA: An Interview with Augusto Boal," *Theatre Drama Review*, vol. 34, no. 3 (Fall, 1990): 50-65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146069>.

<sup>21</sup> Andy McLaverty-Robinson, "Augusto Boal: Games and Techniques," *Ceasefire*, January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/augusto-boal-games-techniques/>.

performers as they would in real life (Boal was not the sole inventor of this type of performance, as many different forms of guerrilla theatre predate Invisible Theatre).<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, for Invisible Theatre to be effective, the actors have to disguise themselves as part of the crowd. There can also be no announcement beforehand that a performance is taking place. Additionally, unlike other iterations of Theatre of the Oppressed, Invisible Theatre performances are always extensively rehearsed; it takes coordination to be implemented effectively, and the actors have to be trained to stay in character no matter how the public engages with them. Although this is an unconventional way to produce theatre, the purpose of Invisible Theatre is to make performances seem as realistic as possible in order to elicit a more spontaneous response from the audience. While there are many potential uses for this practice, it is typically employed to draw attention to social and political issues that have been suppressed or underappreciated.

Invisible Theatre is perhaps the most controversial of Augusto Boal's practices. There are significant moral considerations associated with it that often make it challenging to produce.<sup>23</sup> For instance, because audience members are typically unaware they are watching a performance, they may react to the performers in unforeseeable and undesirable ways. Therefore, it can be viewed as morally objectionable because it forces people to partake in a theatrical performance without their consent and potentially cause them unintended harm. For this reason, Boal became more discerning in his

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<sup>22</sup> Michael William Doyle, "Staging the Revolution: Guerrilla Theater as a Countercultural Practice, 1965-1968," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s* (New York City, New York; Routledge Publishing, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Bonnie Burstow, "Invisible Theatre, Ethics, and the Adult Educator," *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2008): 273-288.

implementation of Invisible Theatre towards the latter half of his career (primarily due to having some negative experiences with it). Ultimately, he came to the realization that the method should only be employed in certain situations, and it is the most productive when the performers have clearly defined parameters in which to operate.<sup>24</sup> Like most of the techniques that now constitute Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal's revaluation of Invisible Theatre speaks to the praxis's continuous progression.

The final variation of Theatre of the Oppressed that needs to be discussed is the Rainbow of Desire. Out of the panoply of Augusto Boal's methods, it is arguably the most widely applicable, as it focuses more heavily on internal oppressors rather than external ones. Boal created the Rainbow of Desire in response to the assertion that his techniques were not appropriate in more privileged communities (or, as he preferred to call them, the "Global North"), as people in these settings typically have more difficulty identifying oppressor and oppressed relationships. Like much of Boal's exercises, the Rainbow of Desire developed out of his practical work. During his prolonged exile in Europe, he recognized that the participants in his workshops dealt with different, less overt forms of oppression. Instead of contending with external oppressions such as famine, war, and disease, people from these affluent countries struggled with more abstract kinds of oppression, like loneliness and self-fulfillment.<sup>25</sup> Although Boal had encountered these problems while working in Brazil and other parts of South America,

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<sup>24</sup> Augusto Boal and Susana Epstein, "Invisible Theatre: Liege, Belgium 1978," *The Dramatic Review*, vol. 34, no. 3 (Autumn, 1990): 24 – 34. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146066>.

<sup>25</sup> Andy McLaverty-Robinson, "Augusto Boal: The Rainbow of Desire," *Ceasefire*, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/augusto-boal-rainbow-desire/>.

they were typically overshadowed by more obvious forms of oppression (e.g., violence and poverty) that were more pressing to people.

The Cop in the Head, a critical concept in Theatre of the Oppressed, was also developed as part of the Rainbow of Desire. During his time in Europe, Augusto Boal recognized that every person possesses different inner voices that prevent them from pursuing desirable and beneficial actions.<sup>26</sup> Equally problematic, they often act as inhibitors for voicing opinions or aspirations as well. As a result of this internal censorship, Boal argued that very few people are capable of expressing themselves fully. Accordingly, The Rainbow of Desire technique aims to take these “cops” out of people’s heads and tackle them collectively through the medium of performance. By giving externalized form to these internalized oppressors, Boal desired to have people understand that they have the ability to counteract them.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, by closely examining these internal strictures, the Rainbow of Desire asks participants to recognize that they can speak out against injustice, even though they have been preconditioned not to. In other words, by developing into a less inhibited person, Boal believed people could help others by speaking up for social change.

While these are the principal methods that constitute Theatre of the Oppressed, this is not an exhaustive list of all of the techniques that are now considered part of the theatrical movement. There are several other methods that were not discussed in this

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<sup>26</sup> Augusto Boal, “The Cop in the Head: The Three Hypotheses,” trans. Susana Epstein, *The Drama Review*, vol. 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 35-42. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146067>.

<sup>27</sup> Nomadoc, “The Theatre of the Oppressed: A Rehearsal for the Revolution,” produced by Happy Ant Documentary Productions, YouTube, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.nomadoc.eu/179/#more-179>.

section that currently comprise the praxis. While some of these exercises were conceived by Augusto Boal himself, there are several others that have been created by more contemporary Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners. However, this truncated overview of the fundamental principles of Theatre of the Oppressed is meant to serve as an introduction to the theatrical movement. Ideally, this section has provided sufficient background information to understand the finer points of the argument that is taking place between Marc Weinblatt/Cheryl Harrison and Dr. Tania S. Cañas concerning the adaptation of Boal's methods.

## CHAPTER III

### A FUNDAMENTAL DISAGREEMENT

This chapter seeks to contextualize the articles of Marc Weinblatt/Cheryl Harrison and Dr. Tania S. Cañas to achieve a more nuanced understanding of their arguments for and against Theatre of the Oppressor. Weinblatt coined this term to refer to the incorporation of socially privileged people into Theatre of the Oppressed practices (he and Harrison believe that this innovative approach can be more beneficial for certain groups of participants). Accordingly, the first two sections provide a detailed analysis of each of their texts. However, this examination is not intended to be a critique of their arguments, but rather it aims to clarify each of the author's positions. The argument between Weinblatt/Harrison and Cañas has significant implications within the Theatre of the Oppressed community, as it could dramatically shape Augusto Boal's praxis in the future. As such, the opening section studies Weinblatt/Harrison's article to understand their impetus for creating Theatre of the Oppressor and how their modification of Boal's methods looks in practice. The second section then pivots to Cañas's article, where she details her issues with Weinblatt/Harrison's suppositions. Additionally, it explores why she believes it is paramount that marginalized people continue to remain the central focus in every iteration of Theatre of the Oppressed. Finally, the third section considers whether Weinblatt and Harrison's application of Theatre of the Oppressed is a form of appropriation or if it has merit as a new iteration of the theatrical movement.

#### A Theatre of the Oppressor

In their 2011 article "Theatre of the Oppressor," Weinblatt and Harrison discuss the possibility of reconstituting aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed for use with

privileged communities in order to help them recognize how they can be better advocates for social change. Weinblatt begins the piece by explaining that he believes that everyone must be proactive in exposing social injustice and that supporting others is the only way to truly extinguish systemic oppression. Weinblatt goes on to clarify that when he is speaking about systemic oppression, he is referring to "...the historic, institutional, and socially pervasive disempowerment of a social group by another social group or society at large."<sup>28</sup> In his opinion, people who have substantial agency (e.g., people who have high socioeconomic status, are well-educated, and are gender normative) have to recognize their privilege and serve as an ally for disenfranchised people, many of which do not have the platform to voice their grievances. Yet, Weinblatt stresses that this recognition is not meant to be an admonishment of individuals in a resourced position or the groups they belong to, but instead, it serves to facilitate more productive discussions in Theatre of the Oppressed workshops. Accordingly, Weinblatt and Harrison's modification of Augusto Boal's exercises is meant to help support marginalized people more effectively by including participants who are typically viewed as privileged within the performance-making process. Furthermore, Weinblatt reiterates that the distinction between oppressor and oppressed is often complicated (particularly in more prosperous countries), as there are some people who cannot be exclusively placed into either one of these categories.

Weinblatt continues his discussion about Theatre of the Oppressor by providing some concrete examples of how he and Harrison have applied this new approach to

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<sup>28</sup> Marc Weinblatt, "Theatre of the Oppressor: Working with Privilege Toward Social Justice," with contributions by Cheryl Harrison, in *Come Closer: Critical Perspective on Theatre of the Oppressed*, ed. Toby Emert and Ellie Friedland (New York City, New York; Peter Lang Publishing, 2011): 21 – 31.

Boal's methods. He clarifies that their work with the Mandala Center for Change (located in Port Townsend, Washington, a predominately Caucasian and affluent community) has primarily revolved around issues of racism, economic inequities, and sexual discrimination. Weinblatt believes these are especially contentious subjects within an increasingly multicultural and multiethnic United States, and, unsurprisingly, they often lead to heated debates when they are discussed. He further details that this focus came about organically, as people have tended to gravitate towards these topics even in more general anti-oppression programs that he has led. As a result of the potentially divisive nature of Theatre of the Oppressor, in workshops where the discussion of race is the focal point participants are often divided into various social identity groups (e.g., a group of "targets," or marginalized people, and another of "agents," or privileged people), with Weinblatt typically leading one section and Harrison leading the other. While this may seem somewhat problematic on the surface, Weinblatt argues that creating these separate caucuses is ultimately a more productive approach because it highlights the different ways people think social change can be accomplished. However, he also emphasizes that this is not meant to generate division (although Dr. Tania S. Cañas reasons that this tactic only assists in reinforcing these simplistic binaries). The reason he gives for this approach is that it enables individuals to express opinions that they often feel uncomfortable discussing with the general public or people who do not share the same social and racial identity. Furthermore, Weinblatt maintains that acknowledging the differences between these groups is vital for bridging divisions between them because it helps create a more truthful dialogue. He goes on to characterize this process as a more inclusive pedagogy,



as it invites those in a resourced position to help solve the problem rather than relegating them to the sideline.

Weinblatt and Harrison stress that allies within Theatre of the Oppressor (e.g., participants who come from a dominant and advantaged social group) are usually not intended to speak directly for oppressed individuals (e.g., participants who have come from a historically disadvantaged or marginalized group). For instance, one popular Theatre of the Oppressed technique that Weinblatt and Harrison have adapted for their workshops is Forum Theatre. In more traditional iterations of Forum Theatre, all participants have the ability to replace the person expressing their personal story of oppression and enact possible solutions to counter their persecution.<sup>29</sup> However, in Theatre of the Oppressor, allies do not typically stand in for these individuals. Instead, they often play a version of themselves, or that is to say, a potential advocate. In most Theatre of the Oppressor workshops, there is a healthy mix of marginalized and privileged participants, although it tends to skew to the latter given the makeup of Port Townsend, Washington (where these techniques have primarily been applied). Working together, both groups contemplate the various ways that they can support the individual who is discussing their story of oppression. However, Weinblatt emphasizes that allies need to continually converse with disenfranchised individuals to ascertain whether or not they genuinely want them to speak or take action on their behalf. He cautions that while people who have endured injustice are often appreciative to have help from allies, he and Harrison believe it is highly problematic to assume they always need or desire it.

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<sup>29</sup> Shannon Ivey, "Forum Theatre Performance: Shannon Ivey and STATE of Performance," TEDx Talks, published May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcLcXe XJVDU>.

Another aspect of Forum Theatre that Weinblatt and Harrison have experimented with is having participants replace the character serving as the oppressor in a given scene. This tactic's primary purpose is to have people identify the oppressor's motivation and discover supportive actions to remedy the problems they are acting out. Moreover, it helps them to recognize their own implicit biases and privilege. This role-playing exercise also incorporates several characteristics of the Cop in the Head technique. As stated previously, this Theatre of the Oppressed method was explicitly created by Augusto Boal to address less overt forms of oppression he encountered while working in Europe.<sup>30</sup> Within Theatre of the Oppressor, the Cop in the Head technique has been repurposed by Weinblatt and Harrison to help participants explore both internalized privilege and outward oppression.

The alteration of the Cop in the Head structure for Theatre of the Oppressor workshops is intended to help people understand that they possess inner voices that contribute to the perpetuation of highly detrimental attitudes, which are harmful not only to the individual but to society as well. In his article, Weinblatt refers to a workshop he co-facilitated where two high school students, one who was affluent and of European descent and the other underprivileged and of African descent, acted out a scenario where they both received low marks on a test. In the scene, the first student's inner voice told them to speak to their teacher and demand that their grade be changed to a higher one. On the other hand, the second student did not feel that it was a productive strategy to talk to the teacher because their inner voice convinced them they would automatically be ignored. Furthermore, this person believed that it was impossible for them ever to be

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<sup>30</sup> Barbara Norden, "The Cop in the Head," *New Statesman & Society*, vol. 5, no. 195 (March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1992): 33.

admitted into a prestigious university, so it was ultimately inconsequential to receive higher marks on the test. For Weinblatt, this exercise elucidates how disenfranchised people often unconsciously oppress themselves by not self-advocating, as many have been conditioned by society to believe that they cannot improve their current predicament. Conversely, he argues that people who come from privileged backgrounds rarely think in these self-defeating terms. Weinblatt and Harrison have also led other programs that have dealt with more overt issues concerning race relations. For instance, one such workshop explored various ways to confront blatant acts of racism and how the bystander effect contributes to the continuation of institutionalized discrimination.

In the final but perhaps the most crucial section of Weinblatt and Harrison's article, they address some potential pitfalls in reconceptualizing Theatre of the Oppressed methods. In particular, they acknowledge that Theatre of the Oppressor techniques can occasionally generate division in workshops, especially within mixed identity groups (e.g., those with participants from different ethnicities, sexual preferences or identities, and class). This is because people can fixate on their own preconceptions of how to address prejudice, and ironically they often ignore the perspectives of the marginalized group. Furthermore, participants can also be resistant to being separated into different factions; it can be challenging for some individuals to address the privilege they hold over others. This resistance can often manifest when other aspects of their social identity have made them a target of discrimination or if they do not have to confront injustice on a daily basis.

Weinblatt maintains that despite the possible risks associated with his and Harrison's emergent practice, the work is ultimately constructive because it engenders

more solidarity amongst the participants. Additionally, he asserts that this united front is an indispensable tool in helping to further sustained and widespread societal changes. Weinblatt also takes issue with the assertion that he is merely preaching to the already converted, a common criticism of his and Harrison's work with the Mandala Center for Change, as they have predominately worked with privileged people given the location of the organization (again, the population of Port Townsend is mainly of European descent and upper-class).<sup>31</sup> Given the insular nature of affluent communities, it is perhaps unavoidable that Theatre of Oppressed centers situated in these areas must contend with this characterization of their work. However, Weinblatt believes that if individuals with agency genuinely want to become an advocate for oppressed people, they have a responsibility to continually reflect on their actions and get better informed about underappreciated social issues.

### A Continued Theatre of the Oppressed

In 2020, Dr. Tania S. Cañas penned an article entitled “A Continued Theatre of the Oppressed” in response to Weinblatt and Harrison's work. In it, she contends that although Theatre of the Oppressor is a well-intentioned endeavor, its central assumptions and tenets hinder it from being truly productive. Furthermore, she argues that by decentering the oppressed within Theatre of the Oppressed practices, Weinblatt and Harrison are potentially diminishing their significance. For Cañas, their approach transmutes the praxis and stands in direct opposition to the emancipatory spirit that is

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<sup>31</sup> United States Census Bureau, *Quick Facts: Port Townsend City, Washington, 2019*, accessed on 12/16/2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/porttownsendcitywashington>.

supposed to inform all of Augusto Boal's methods.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, though, she emphasizes that her purpose is not merely a polemic that suggests who can or cannot call themselves oppressed. Rather, her rebuttal attempts to ascertain who ultimately benefits from a Theatre of the Oppressor.

Dr. Cañas begins her article by asserting that it is nearly impossible for there to be an honest dialogue between oppressors and the oppressed when unequal power structures within society still exist. She further maintains that colonization, the disposition and inequitable access to land, and the denial of fundamental human rights have made it challenging for oppressed people to speak in an uninhibited manner within mixed company. Cañas argues that whether it is done intentionally or not, this ingrained and pervasive hierarchy almost always dominates the discussion and often silences the voices of marginalized individuals. Although Weinblatt acknowledges this predicament within his article, explaining that this is why he usually divides Theatre of the Oppressor participants into different caucuses, Cañas believes this problem is ultimately insurmountable. While she admits that this initial separation can lead to more productive conversations within these divided groups, providing privileged participants the ability to speak in the latter half of the classes is potentially problematic. According to Cañas, their incorporation into Theatre of the Oppressed practices does not lead to a more inclusive pedagogy, as Weinblatt and Harrison assert. Instead, she maintains that their approach takes over one of the few mediums through which marginalized people can openly discuss the oppression they have endured and contemplate ways to enact social change.

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<sup>32</sup> Tania S. Cañas, "A Continued Theatre of the Oppressed," ed. Mark Weinberg, *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*, vol. 5, (Fall, 2020): <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ptoj/vol5/iss1/>.

In the subsequent section of her article, Dr. Tania S. Cañas discusses an example that Augusto Boal often used to illustrate the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. The scene involved one man lying with his back to the ground trying to stand up (the oppressed), while another inhibited him by standing with his foot on his chest (the oppressor). For Boal, the image represented how arduous it is for disenfranchised people to gain equal footing in society, as there is always an oppressive force bearing down on them. While it is clearly evocative, Cañas references Boal's example because Weinblatt has often utilized it to help explain the poetics of Theatre of the Oppressor. Along with other proponents of a more inclusive Theatre of the Oppressed, he has suggested that it would be easier for marginalized people to become liberated if the oppressor simply removed their foot and allowed them to get up. While Cañas believes that Weinblatt and Harrison have modified Boal's practices in good faith, she takes issue with their proposed solution to this imagined scenario because it negates the possibility of self-determination. She contends that although the oppressor lifting their foot would undoubtedly provide an immediate benefit to the oppressed, it still allows them to retain their control by dictating who possesses agency and when they can have it. Moreover, she points out that relying on people who hold these resourced positions to relinquish their power is incredibly dangerous, as they have historically been unwilling to forfeit this kind of influence. Cañas goes on to emphasize that if disenfranchised people are ever to achieve long-lasting equality, it will have to be through their own effort.

Dr. Cañas closes her article by reiterating why it is vital to continue centering the oppressed in Augusto Boal's methods. While she recognizes that Weinblatt and Harrison's work highlights how Theatre of the Oppressed often ignores intersectionalities

by forcing people to view themselves as either oppressor and oppressed, she maintains that this muddling of power dynamics overwhelmingly serves those who possess agency. Cañas warns that if everyone is culpable for inequality to a certain degree, individuals can avoid becoming targets as it becomes increasingly more difficult to assign blame. Furthermore, she argues that while their approach may foster allyship, it does not necessarily challenge the structures that perpetuate oppression. In effect, by failing to acknowledge their role in this system, Cañas believes that privileged people help maintain the status quo. Perhaps even more problematically, though, she warns that this abdication of responsibility within Theatre of the Oppressor workshops can potentially relativize marginalized people's concerns and lead to unproductive discussions that fail to address the real issue. In other words, by allowing every participant to question what constitutes oppression, Cañas believes that Weinblatt and Harrison's approach will prevent the truly oppressed from tackling subjects that are most material to them.

### Is Theatre of the Oppressor Appropriation?

While Dr. Cañas does not explicitly reference appropriation within her article, the issue nonetheless informs much of her argument against Theatre of the Oppressor. For Cañas, the central proposition made by Weinblatt and Harrison for reimagining Theatre of the Oppressed is flawed because it effectively co-opts the practice. She reasons that by incorporating the oppressor into this critical dialogue for social change, the privileged have the capacity to take away the means of theatrical production from the people and use it to reiterate their own priorities, which is the exact opposite of what Theatre of the Oppressed seeks to accomplish. Accordingly, this reconceptualization could be considered appropriation in the simplest definition of the term, as a dominant group is

repurposing an artform intended for a marginalized group. An excellent accompaniment to Cañas's argument comes from Dr. Sophie Coudray, who points out that within Theatre of the Oppressed, "...the real targets of Boal's attack are the producers of these aesthetic representations. Boal is suspicious of the spectator's position because he doesn't trust the artistic producers whose plays only serve their interests by showing the world according to their ideological point of view."<sup>33</sup> Much like Cañas's article, Coudray's astute observation underscores the importance of keeping the oppressed at the forefront of Augusto Boal's revolutionary theatrical praxis. Additionally, it speaks to the potential consequences of allowing privileged people to inform the process in any way, even if it is relatively minimal and done for supposedly altruistic reasons. In short, Cañas's insistence that marginalized people have to continue creating theatre solely by and for themselves (while adhering to the original structure of Theatre of the Oppressed) is not only a way for them to retain a means of personal expression, but she also believes that it is the only way to genuinely tackle social inequity.

Although Dr. Cañas makes several excellent points in her article, one possible issue with her position is that it fails to take into account that Theatre of the Oppressed was always intended to adapt to different situations; it is a form of theatrical performance that is most effective when it is responding to the present needs of its participants. Another potential problem with her argument is that it complicates the question concerning who should be considered an oppressor. Is a person automatically considered an oppressor if they belong to a particular gender, ethnicity, or social/economic class?

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<sup>33</sup> Sophie Coudray, "The Theatre of the Oppressed," *Theatre: Culture Matters*, January 28, 2017, <https://www.culturematters.org.uk/index.php/arts/theatre/itemlist/user/701-sophiecoudray>.



Even if they meet the typical definition of an oppressor, those this automatically preclude them from engaging with Theatre of the Oppressed? Boal himself may have been given this designation (he was male, fair-skinned, and affluent), and many people with similar backgrounds championed his work. Finally, as Boal's ultimate goal was to eradicate oppression (and he was generally supportive of anyone who shared a similar purpose), it is unclear whether he would have approved of Theatre of the Oppressor or not.

It is also critical to point out that Boal is at least partially responsible for this ongoing dispute regarding Theatre of the Oppressed's reworking. The reason for this is that the deliberate flexibility of his theatrical praxis has permitted it to be open to multiple interpretations. Moreover, Boal further exacerbated this problem because he often gave conflicting views on whether Theatre of the Oppressed practices should be modified or not. For instance, he would often emphasize the importance of adhering to the precepts he initially laid out to ensure that his exercises maintained their revolutionary purpose. At the same time, he would also routinely encourage Jokers to carry his work forward by expanding upon his original theories and find new means to help disenfranchised people.

For all these reasons mentioned above, it is perhaps impossible to definitively answer the contentious question surrounding the adaptation of Theatre of the Oppressed. Likewise, it is difficult to ascertain whether Weinblatt and Harrison's approach is actually beneficial for enacting social change. While their methods differ markedly from Augusto Boal's original exercises, it is difficult to deny that their intent to help marginalized people remains essentially the same. Additionally, in regards to appropriation, while Theatre of the Oppressor admittedly entails people of privilege reconstituting an art form

that was created specifically for the disadvantaged, there are other factors that complicate the issue. For one thing, as addressed previously, the delineation between oppressor and oppressed within affluent countries is frequently murky, and often people can fall into either category depending on the particular workshop or exercise they find themselves in. Additionally, Weinblatt and Harrison explicitly state in their article that Theatre of the Oppressor is not meant to exclude oppressed people from the conversation and that there should always be a concerted effort to make them the primary focus of every workshop.

So, the question remains whether Theatre of the Oppressor is, in fact, appropriation. While the articles written by Weinblatt/Harrison and Cañas both speak in detail about this issue, this disagreement is unlikely to be resolved by solely comparing the two texts. As such, it may be beneficial to look outwards for a more detailed explanation of what does and does not constitute appropriation. One such definition comes from Dr. James O. Young in his article “Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation.” In Young’s seminal article, he lays out what he considers the three principal forms of cultural appropriation: subject appropriation, content appropriation, and object appropriation. In terms of Theatre of the Oppressor, an argument could certainly be made that his definition of content appropriation is applicable. Young describes content appropriation as an occurrence when “...an artist uses the cultural products of another culture in the production of his or her own art.”<sup>34</sup> With just a cursory glance, one could understandably come to the conclusion that Theatre of the Oppressor aligns with Young’s definition of content appropriation.

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<sup>34</sup> James O. Young, “Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Spring, 2005): 135-146.

It is crucial to keep in mind that Augusto Boal created Theatre of the Oppressed within the oppressive milieu of mid-twentieth century Brazil. Hence, the theatrical praxis was explicitly designed to help liberate individuals dealing with substantial inequalities and easily recognizable external oppressors. The fight against oppression was not an abstract concept for these people but was a tangible problem they had to contend with daily. This critical dimension of Boal's practices is perhaps best explained by the scholar and theatre practitioner Mady Schutzman. In her article "Activism, Therapy, or Nostalgia: Theatre of the Oppressed in NYC," she reminds us that when Boal initiated Theatre of the Oppressed, he was "...living under a hard-line military-based regime in Brazil. The enemy was evident; the oppressive economic and political conditions derived from a known source, however masked its cultural agents may have been. Censorship, repression, violence, and exile were commonplace."<sup>35</sup> Schutzman's remarks speak to Theatre of the Oppressed's intended functionality and the essential role this new participatory type of theatre fulfilled for the Brazilian people. Likewise, her statement reiterates that while performance was a central component of Boal's early methodologies, the highest emphasis was always placed on their emancipatory purpose.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, though, it also critical to reiterate that once Augusto Boal was forced to leave Brazil, he was the one who lead the charge in expanding Theatre of the

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<sup>35</sup> Mady Schutzman, "Activism, Therapy, or Nostalgia: Theatre of the Oppressed in NYC," *Theatre Drama Review*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1990): 77-83, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146071>.

<sup>36</sup> Augusto Boal, "Lecture/Demonstration at the Martin Luther King Center," NYU: Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library, recorded in New York City, New York; Martin Luther King Center, October 7, 200, <https://sites.dlib.nyu.edu/hidvl/4f4qrht1>.

Oppressed to address more intangible forms of oppression. As stated earlier, for most of Boal's exile, he worked predominately in western European countries such as Portugal and France. Although Europe was mostly devoid of the kind of overt oppression he had dealt with in Brazil and other South American countries, Boal began to realize that oppression still existed in affluent nations; it just manifested differently. The oppression he encountered in Europe was not the kind of physical torment he had intended to confront with his theatrical exercises but rather internalized oppression. Although people did not have to fear for their physical well-being or contend with devastating political corruption, they did not necessarily feel satisfied or that they had a purpose in their lives. This problem is perhaps made most apparent by the alarmingly high number of suicides in these countries, as Europe is a region with an incredibly high rate of suicide.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, many of the later methods created within Boal's theatrical praxis were explicitly designed to tackle this issue (e.g., the Rainbow of Desire and the Cop in the Head).<sup>38</sup> Moreover, these techniques are now a significant component of Theatre of the Oppressed and are arguably just as critical today to the theatrical movement as Boal's early innovations.

Given the fact that Augusto Boal himself developed and altered many of the exercises within Theatre of the Oppressed so an array of people could make use of them,

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<sup>37</sup> Dévora Kestel and Mark Van Ommeren, *Suicide in the World: Global Health Estimates*, World Health Organization, 2016, <https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/suicide-data#:~:text=Suicide%20is%20a%20global%20phenomenon%3B%20in%20fact%2C%2079%25%20of%20cause%20of%20death%20in%20201.>

<sup>38</sup> Augusto Boal, "Augusto Boal at the 1992 ATHE Conference," NYU: Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library, recorded in Atlanta, Georgia; Association for Theatre in Higher Education, August 1, 1992, <https://sites.dlib.nyu.edu/hidvl/0p2nghb4>.

the issue of appropriation is invariably complicated. As such, it is unclear whether Theatre of the Oppressor can be classified as a form of appropriation, as the theatrical praxis was never intended to be the providence of a particular group or culture. Additionally, it is also difficult to ascertain if Weinblatt and Harrison are genuinely taking away a means of expression and liberation from marginalized individuals by incorporating privileged participants (or oppressors) into their workshops; given the discussion of the Theatre of the Oppressor exercises in their article, it does not appear that their approach is necessarily one of exclusion (it appears to be much more focused on inclusion). Furthermore, it must also be acknowledged where these exercises are being employed significantly affect how they are viewed and their impact on disenfranchised communities. When performed in the wrong context, they could understandably be regarded as insensitive by people who have or are currently contending with substantial and overt oppression. However, up to this point, they have almost exclusively been applied in more privileged areas of the United States, where Theatre of the Oppressed participants are far less likely to have suffered from explicit forms of oppression.

### Theatre of the Oppressed Training Practices

Another aspect of Theatre of the Oppressed that may provide some additional insight into the argument between Weinblatt/Harrison and Cañas is the manner in which new Jokers are typically trained. As discussed earlier in the thesis, Augusto Boal was continually amending aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed throughout his life, adapting them as he encountered different forms of oppression or alternative ways of working. This attitude towards his work resulted in Boal becoming a strong proponent for his exercises being employed in different ways to help as many oppressed or marginalized

people as possible. He also routinely referred to his teachings as a framework, one that championed a few fundamental principles but was not necessarily meant to be doggedly interpreted. Boal's belief that Theatre of the Oppressed practices should continually evolve is perhaps made most evident by his focus on training. Not only did he routinely hold workshops to teach people about Theatre of the Oppressed, but he also took numerous proteges under his tutelage to ensure that his work was carried forward after he was no longer alive.

During Boal's lifetime, most Joker training took place at the various Theatre of the Oppressed conferences he led (e.g., the International Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference), where new and more seasoned facilitators could refine their skills together.<sup>39</sup> Today, most Joker training continues to occur at these annual conferences or dedicated Theatre of the Oppressed centers (such as those discussed later in this thesis). More often than not, special guest trainers are brought in to lead these programs. Typically, these are people with extensive practical experience facilitating Theatre of the Oppressed workshops, and many of them studied with Boal himself (there is a slight hierarchy amongst Theatre of the Oppressed facilitators, with proclivity often given to those who worked directly with Boal). Generally speaking, in Theatre of the Oppressed training programs, there is an emphasis placed on both the technical aspects of the praxis (e.g., learning the various exercises and how they are intended to function) and the more significant theoretical concepts that drive it. While being well-versed with all of the Theatre of the Oppressed practices is undoubtedly a prerequisite for every Joker (or

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<sup>39</sup> Toby Emert and Ellie Friedland, "Introduction," In *Come Closer: Critical Perspective on Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York City, New York; Peter Lang Publishing, 2011): 1-5.

any person who facilitates these workshops), it is perhaps more critical for them to have a firm grasp of the methodology's political and social objectives.<sup>40</sup> For this reason, Boal often referred to people he trained as “multipliers,” as he not only wanted them to spread his theories worldwide but also to translate them by putting them into practice.

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<sup>40</sup> Sruti Bala and Aristita I. Albacan, “Workshopping the Revolution? On the Phenomenon of Joker Training in the Theatre of the Oppressed,” in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, vol. 18, no. 4 (November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013): 388-402.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONTEMPORARY THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED PRACTITIONERS

So, the question remains whether Augusto Boal's practices should be adapted for more privileged participants or not? The previous chapters in this thesis have laid out Weinblatt and Harrison's affirmative rationale for their Theatre of the Oppressor, as well as Cañas's rebuttal. However, while these three are certainly at the forefront of this ongoing argument, other perspectives should also be considered. Today, there are numerous Theatre of the Oppressed companies and practitioners the world over that are putting Boal's theories and methods to use in diverse communities, adapting and applying Boal's methods to their unique (and yes, sometimes privileged) community concerns. Theatre of the Oppressed methods are now applied across the world in schools, refugee camps, and prisons, as well as in middle-class settings where participants envision themselves as allies to the underprivileged that Boal initially set out to empower. Perhaps practitioners will never reach a consensus about the fundamental questions of adaptation/applicability raised by the Weinblatt & Harrison/Cañas debate. Still, those questions – of who Theatre of the Oppressed is ultimately for – continue to live into practice. We have much to learn from the many and varied contemporary Theatre of the Oppressed specialists and organizations about how Augusto Boal's original concepts continue to evolve. As such, this chapter will explore the application of Boal's theories and methods and adaptations thereof by several prominent Theatre of Oppressed companies and artists worldwide to locate what can be understood as best practices.

While there are many Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners and organizations operating today, a select number stand out regarding their ongoing development of the



practice and how they have contended with this issue of privilege. This includes the work of theatre artists with world-renowned theatre companies such as Katy Rubin at Theatre of the Oppressed New York City (or TONYC), Dr. Sanjoy Ganguly at the India-based company Jana Sanskriti, and Geo Britto and Bárbara Santos at the previously mentioned Center of the Theatre of the Oppressed Rio de Janeiro (or CTO Rio). It also comprises artists working with smaller companies, such as Luc Opdebeeck at Formaat in Rotterdam, Netherlands, and Augusto Boal's son, Julian. While these theatre practitioners and organizations work in different contexts and often with dissimilar groups of participants, they all provide fascinating perspectives towards both reaffirming and modifying Theatre of the Oppressed practices.

#### Theatre of the Oppressed New York City

Founded in 2011 by the theatre artist Katy Rubin, Theatre of the Oppressed New York City is a nonprofit organization that employs applied theatre techniques to facilitate social change throughout the New York metropolitan area.<sup>41</sup> Rubin, who recently stepped down as executive director of the company after eight years, previously trained underneath Boal at CTO Rio before he passed away in 2009. She has also worked with other internationally renowned Theatre of the Oppressed centers such as Jana Sanskriti, Mind the Gap in Yorkshire, and Cardboard Citizens in London. The initial idea for TONYC derived from Rubin's desire to see Theatre of the Oppressed applied more practically in the United States as she had experienced it in Brazil. That is, she wanted it

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<sup>41</sup> Katy Rubin and Majory LaPointe, "Katy Rubin and Majory LaPointe: Theatre of the Oppressed," interview with Sheryl McCarthy, on One to One: City University of New York Television, May 15th, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xd9h76GypXs>.

employed more broadly and outside academic settings. Therefore, like many organizations that use Augusto Boal's practices, TONYC has endeavored to use theatre to address and change significant social, public health, and political issues in their local communities. Their work has highlighted such problems as homelessness, the AIDs epidemic, abuses within the criminal justice system, and discrimination against people who identify as LGBTQ+.

TONYC stands out compared to other Theatre of the Oppressed organizations because of its unique methodology towards implementing Boal's methods. Rather than tackling these complex issues independently, the company partners with local community members, advocacy partners, grassroots organizations, and government agencies (although they often challenge these institutions in their performances) to create theatre troupes that engage more directly with these diverse communities. TONYC has now established more than sixty distinct theatre groups throughout New York City, in addition to developing an extensive network of Jokers who come from a variety of backgrounds (many of which have been culled from local neighborhoods). Utilizing Forum and Legislative Theatre techniques, these theatrical ensembles create and tour several performances a year that are inspired by their lived experiences and reflect the concerns that are most pertinent to them. Additionally, TONYC strives to develop a greater sense of solidarity amongst these groups by creating connections between them and showcasing the intersectionality of the issues they face.

Much like Weinblatt and Harrison's work, TONYC has tweaked aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed practices to be more applicable to the communities they are trying to serve. In Rubin's view, for Theatre of the Oppressed to truly function as a

catalyst for social change, it must be responsive to the circumstances affecting its participants and seek to resolve the immediate needs of the communities it is trying to serve. As such, TONYC has routinely emphasized the practicality of Boal's exercises; for the organization, Theatre of the Oppressed is not something that should be continually reified within academia or at conferences, but instead should be constantly improved upon through practice. In 2016, Rubin further detailed this vital facet of the company's work in a discussion with fellow Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner Ali Campbell, explaining that:

I believe it is really important for Theatre of the Oppressed work to be local and based in its community, which means to me not training in a university with people who are going to go all over and be somewhere else; not going from city to city doing fancy workshops, but working in a place where people live, living there yourself and working on the issues that affect you and your neighbors.<sup>42</sup>

This functional component of TONYC's work is best represented in some of their more unconventional initiatives, such as the Rapid Response Troupe. This ensemble seeks to expedite the process of Forum Theatre by using performances to support social movements taking place within New York City in a more direct manner. In other words, the company brings Theatre of the Oppressed to people rather than making them seek it out. For instance, one noteworthy project of the Rapid Response Troupe took place during the Ferguson riots in 2014. In response to militarized police action and the

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<sup>42</sup> Katy Rubin, "Theatre of the Oppressor NYC (TONYC): Radically Unsentimental," interview with Ali Campbell, in *Theatre of the Oppressed in Practice Today: An Introduction to the Work and Principles of Augusto Boal*, (Bloomsbury Publishing; New York City, New York, 2019): 159-168.

immense amount of violence spilling out in the streets of New York City, TONYC brought Forum Theatres performances to ongoing protests and local community centers. The purpose of these shows was to help people find more constructive means to express their discontent rather than engaging in destructive riots or combatting the police. TONYC also traveled to Missouri, where they partnered with other Theatre of the Oppressed artists to produce shows in Ferguson and St. Louis. These performances were intended to help local people engage in discussions concerning the structural racism within the United States and spark them to take further action (e.g., voting for politicians and supporting organizations advocating for police reform).<sup>43</sup>

In terms of Theatre of the Oppressor, Rubin's work with TONYC parallels Weinblatt and Harrison's approach in many aspects. Like Weinblatt and Harrison, Rubin believes that it is essential for those with social and economic agency to recognize their privilege and serve as an ally for marginalized people by actively working towards more equity. This attitude is demonstrated in how TONYC implements Theatre of the Oppressed practices and how the organization is structured (a significant percentage of the company's leadership comes from historically underrepresented groups that have been directly impacted by the issues they are trying to address). Additionally, in a similar manner to Weinblatt and Harrison, Rubin has regularly invited participants and organizations to Theatre of the Oppressed performances that have been typically thought of as oppressors. For instance, the company has partnered with several New York City institutions that have been known to possess oppressive power structures (e.g., police

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<sup>43</sup> Claudia Alick, Danny Bryck, Mica Cole, Rebecca Martinez, and Katy Rubin, "Ferguson Moments: Artists Respond," *HowlRound*, September 6th, 2014, [https://www.tonyc.nyc/ferguson\\_moments\\_artists\\_respond](https://www.tonyc.nyc/ferguson_moments_artists_respond).

forces, prisons, and health and housing institutions) to help change them internally. These organizations provide the bulk of the funding and essential support for this critical work, while TONYC provides them with seasoned facilitators. This collaboration is intended to be mutually beneficial; the companies often use the ideas generated within the Forum Theatre performances to make their policies less discriminatory or assist them in staff training. However, this is not to suggest that these partnerships are always fruitful or enduring; TONYC has ended working relationships with organizations when they feel that they are not genuinely trying to implement change or are not allowing participants to speak freely.

Throughout her time at TONYC, Rubin also emphasized that Jokers who come from a resourced position must be mindful of how they facilitate Theatre of the Oppressed performances and workshops to avoid reiterating the same kind of structural oppression they are trying to eradicate. TONYC has attempted to mitigate this problem by ensuring that two Jokers facilitate all of their events. Moreover, the pair is almost always multiracial to safeguard against any internalized biases that may negatively impact Theatre of the Oppressed exercises.<sup>44</sup> In many ways, this mirrors the tactics Weinblatt and Harrison have started to employ within Theatre of the Oppressor workshops, specifically when they divide participants into different caucuses. While it may be debatable whether this tactic is ultimately productive, at the very least, it showcases that these artists are acknowledging how privilege can shape Theatre of the

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<sup>44</sup> Katy Rubin, "Theatre of the Oppressed NYC: Radical Partnerships on the Ground in New York City," in *The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed*, ed. Kelly Howe, Julian Boal, and José Soeiro (Routledge Publishing; New York City, New York, 2019): 431 – 436.

Oppressed practices even when the facilitator's intentions are well-meaning. Moreover, while Cañas disagrees with Weinblatt and Harrison on many points, she has stressed that having an awareness of one's social positionality is paramount for anyone who wishes to work with marginalized communities.<sup>45</sup>

### Jana Sanskriti

Jana Sanskriti (or in Bengali, “People’s Culture”) is an internationally renowned Theatre of the Oppressed center that operates throughout India, although the bulk of their work has been undertaken in Western Bengal's more underprivileged rural areas. The organization was established in 1985 by Dr. Sanjoy Ganguly, who had no prior experience with theatre before founding the company and intended to use the art form as a means of political activism. Initially, Jana Sanskriti started out performing in small villages in the Sundarbans. However, it expanded rapidly after becoming the first theatre company in the country to use Augusto Boal's practices. Today, it is considered one of the largest and most influential Theatre of the Oppressed centers in the world, apart from perhaps CTO Rio. Jana Sanskriti has an extensive network of theatre groups (it currently has more than thirty separate groups that fall underneath its auspices), and their performances are seen by millions of people a year. Boal himself considered Jana Sanskriti to be an excellent representation of how his concepts could be applied internationally, and he had a great working relationship with Ganguly.

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<sup>45</sup> Tania S. Cañas, “10 Things You Need to Consider if You are an Artist? Not of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Community- Looking to Work with our Community,” Rise: Current Affairs, October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.riserefugee.org/10-things-you-need-to-consider-if-you-are-an-artist-not-of-the-refugee-and-asylum-seeker-community-looking-to-work-with-our-community/>.

Much like Brazil, Theatre of the Oppressed has a particular exigency in India given its longstanding social and political inequity resulting from both colonialism and its complicated history with the caste system (for some people, this is still a significant component of Hinduism and a practice that predates the British Raj).<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, Jana Sanskriti's plays have dealt with a number of profoundly challenging issues, ranging from discrimination based on social class, the patriarchal oppression of women, child abuse, sex trafficking, famine, and displacement. While the organization's reputation has unquestionably been built from this critical work, their emphasis on training and generating new approaches towards implementing and adapting Theatre of the Oppressed practices has also brought them well-deserved attention. Since 2004, Jana Sanskriti has hosted a bi-annual Forum Theatre festival entitled Muktheadhara. This event not only provides the opportunity for Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners working throughout the world to meet up with one another, but it also assists in training future artists in the field. Additionally, it creates a forum where people can discuss and investigate new working methods within the praxis.

Like many Theatre of the Oppressed centers operating outside of Brazil, Jana Sanskriti has not only been shaped by Augusto Boal's revolutionary theatrical praxis but also local theatrical conventions. In its infancy, the company relied extensively on conventional political theatre as a tool to combat oppression (a well-established form of opposition within India that dates back to the late nineteenth century during the British

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<sup>46</sup> Shubhra Ghoshal and Nirban Manna, "Dialogue for Empowerment: Jana Sanskriti's Experiment with the Method of the Theatre of the Oppressed in Rural Bengal," *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2020): 117 – 130.

Raj).<sup>47</sup> Eventually, though, Ganguly began to move away from this medium when he realized that even though political theatre could elicit an emotional response from the audience, it did not necessarily engage their critical consciousness or lead to sustained change. Subsequently, this recognition convinced him to seek a more participatory form of theatre that would enable a more shared discussion of the issues he was trying to address with the audience in Jana Sanskriti's plays. Ganguly also began incorporating traditional Indian folk theatre into his productions during this period, an art form that is admittedly rife with issues as well (lower castes have traditionally been barred from attending)<sup>48</sup> However, Ganguly was particularly drawn to this type of theatre because it typically seeks to raise questions and discussion rather than provide definitive answers. In turn, this investigation for a more communal theatre led Ganguly to discover the writings of Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed. Eventually, he traveled to Rio de Janeiro to train with Boal at his Center for Theatre of the Oppressed.

While Jana Sanskriti has largely remained loyal to Theatre of the Oppressed's core principles, it has expanded upon Forum Theatre in one key aspect. In a similar fashion to Legislative Theatre, the company has used the discussions generated within its plays to mobilize its participants to form committees. In turn, these groups go out and try to affect change in these rural communities, either through political action or through

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<sup>47</sup> Farley Richmond, "The Political Role of Theatre in India," *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 25, no. 3 (Baltimore, Maryland; John Hopkins University Press, October, 1973): 318-334. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3205692>.

<sup>48</sup> Sheelita Das, "Folk Theatre: Its Relevance in Development Communication in India," *Global Media Journal-Indian Edition*, vol. 4, no. 2 (University of Calcutta; December 2013): [https://caluniv.ac.in/global-media-journal/COMMENTARY-DEC%202013/Commentary\\_8\\_Sheelita\\_Das.pdf](https://caluniv.ac.in/global-media-journal/COMMENTARY-DEC%202013/Commentary_8_Sheelita_Das.pdf).



increased social pressure. For this reason, Dr. Sanjoy Ganguly prefers to call the participants of his workshops “spect-activists” rather than spect-actors.<sup>49</sup> Through their advocacy work, the organization has improved the lives of Indian people in many tangible ways, making strides in critical areas such as healthcare, education, employment opportunities, and women’s rights (several of their theatre groups are entirely composed of women artists, a group of people who have traditionally been afforded few opportunities in India to express themselves publicly). These real-life changes speak to the efficacy of Jana Sanskriti’s expansion on Forum Theatre, and they strengthen the argument for why Boal’s practices should continue to be modified.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, it underscores that Theatre of the Oppressed and other forms of theatre for social change are never performed in isolation; they will unavoidably look different depending on the environment they are being employed in and the ultimate goals of the facilitators who are running the workshop.

Jana Sanskriti has showcased through its success how Boal’s techniques can be recalibrated for different situations to ensure that Theatre of the Oppressed remains relevant. Yet, at the same time, the organization has continually emphasized that the oppressed have to stay at the forefront of the theatrical movement to prevent it from

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<sup>49</sup> Ralph Yarrow, “From Performers to Spectativists: Jana Sanskriti’s Training for Agency in and Beyond Theatre,” in *Indian Theatre Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (April, 2017), <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=euge94201&id=GALE|A494583631&v=2.1&it=r>

<sup>50</sup> Jharna Brahma, Vinod Pavarla, and Vasuki Belavadi, “Driving Social Change Through Forum Theatre: A Study of Jana Sanskriti in West Bengal, India,” *Asia Pacific Media Educator* (Sage Publications, September, 2019), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355595308\\_Driving\\_Social\\_Change\\_Through\\_Forum\\_Theatre\\_A\\_Study\\_of\\_Jana\\_Sanskriti\\_in\\_West\\_Bengal\\_India](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355595308_Driving_Social_Change_Through_Forum_Theatre_A_Study_of_Jana_Sanskriti_in_West_Bengal_India).

becoming didactic.<sup>51</sup> This adherence to Boal's precepts is particularly impressive given Jana Sanskriti's extensive size and the typically massive scope of its projects. In his book *Jana Sanskriti: Forum Theatre and Democracy in India*, Ganguly speaks to this priority and provides some profound insights that may help to elucidate some of the concerns surrounding Theatre of the Oppressor. For instance, he clarifies why he has often employed a circle when leading Theatre of the Oppressed programs with Jana Sanskriti to create a common ground with the participants and reiterate that there should be no hierarchy. The reason why Ganguly has decided to adopt this particular tactic during his workshops is that he believes it helps to mitigate some of the pervasive inequity that derives from the exceedingly complex social identities within his native country and the effect that they have on everyday interactions, explaining that:

In India there are people who belong to lower castes. Even if they have intellectual abilities, they may construct some mental reservations that prevent them from being critical of people who belong to higher and more privileged classes. So in our organization the circle needs to address this and try to create an environment of joint learning where this discrimination does not matter, where 'we' and 'they' disappear. So joint learning starts, pedagogy can be born even in a heterogeneous group.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Sanjoy Ganguly, "Jana Sanskriti: Field Work," interview with Ali Campbell, in *Theatre of the Oppressed in Practice Today: An Introduction to the Work and Principles of Augusto Boal*, (Bloomsbury Publishing; New York City, 2019): 142-158.

<sup>52</sup> Sanjoy Ganguly, *Jana Sanskriti: Forum Theatre and Democracy in India* (New York City; Routledge Publishing, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010): 129. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/reader.action?docID=515376>.

Ganguly's statement is remarkable because it reveals that even when Theatre of the Oppressed exercises are performed in developing countries such as India (where there are potentially more overt forms of oppression than other regions of the world), there can still be power dynamics within these marginalized groups that complicate creative expression. Although Ganguly continues to keep oppressed people at the center of Theatre of the Oppressed practices, his workshops indicate that these groups may not be as homogenous as they appear on the surface. Even with participants who seem to possess relatively similar social identities, there can potentially still be some individuals that hold privilege over others. Moreover, in regards to Theatre of the Oppressor, his recognition of these unequal structures brings into question whether or not Weinblatt and Harrison's approach is drastically altering Boal's theatrical praxis. In some ways, it supports the argument that they are highlighting how complicated the issue of privilege is in Theatre of the Oppressed workshops, regardless of what part of the world you are applying them in. Therefore, their work could be viewed as a way to resolve a common problem that manifests within many of Boal's exercises.

#### The Center for Theatre of the Oppressed - Rio de Janeiro

The Center for Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro (CTO Rio) has been a frontrunner in theatre for social change since it was first established by Boal in 1986. In particular, one of the organization's original members and current leaders, Geo Britto, has been instrumental in expanding Boal's teachings by continuing his critical work both in Brazil and internationally. Britto trained directly with Boal and frequently collaborated with him as a Joker. During his earlier years with CTO Rio, Britto assisted Boal in his implementation of Legislative Theatre throughout his time as a city councilor.

Additionally, Britto helped him compose one of his final books, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, which discussed the practical work of applying Theatre of the Oppressed with different communities. Britto also serves as the artistic director for the School for Popular Theatre (or, in Portuguese, Escola de Teatro Popular), an education program co-facilitated by Boal's son, Julian. As a result of his extensive history with the Boal family, Britto possesses a unique insight into how Theatre of the Oppressed evolved, as he not only witnessed it for himself but also contributed to its development.

One aspect of Theatre of the Oppressed that Britto feels is often overlooked, and needs to be reinforced, is how much the practice has been informed by Marxism. In a lecture he gave in 2016, Britto discussed how Marxist Theory deeply inspired Boal and his theatrical aesthetics.<sup>53</sup> Boal's association with this radical political movement (and other left-leaning ideologies) was pivotal in his initial conceptualization of the Theatre of the Oppressed. During his studies in the United States (and later on, during his exile in Europe), he was introduced to such philosophers as György Lukács and Walter Benjamin, which he read extensively. Britto argues that this association to Marxism is another reason why Boal drew heavily from similarly minded theatrical practitioners, such as Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator. He has also reiterated that in addition to Paulo Freire, Boal was also inspired by other contemporary Brazilian writers and theatre artists with revolutionary beliefs, such as Abdias Nascimento.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Geo Britto, "Augusto Boal's Marxism and the Origins of Theatre of the Oppressed," Marxist Education Projects, Theatre of the Oppressed Laboratory; November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://marxedproject.org/tag/boal/>.

<sup>54</sup> Geo Britto, "Theatre of the Oppressed Lecture," presentation for Historical Materialism Conference, SOAS University of London; November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaC9X7BcOcM>.

The influence of Marxist ideology on Theatre of the Oppressed is evidenced by the fundamental principles that inform the methodology. One of Marxist Theory's central tenets is that class is immensely influenced by one's relationship to capital or, more specifically, the means of production.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Theatre of the Oppressed has been profoundly shaped by the idea that theatrical performances should be placed in the people's hands; they should not solely be the province of individuals who have a tremendous amount of capital to put on elaborate productions. This sentiment was perhaps best encapsulated by Boal in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, when he stated that, "I believe that all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it."<sup>56</sup> Boal's statement does necessarily imply that he believes that all forms of theatre can and should function as a weapon. Instead, it was the purposeful way he employed theatre to combat oppression and to promote social revolution that made it one. Additionally, while the content of Theatre of the Oppressed performances may address contentious political and social issues, what truly makes the praxis revolutionary is that its production model purposefully breaks from institutionalized theatre. As such, Britto makes an excellent point that Jokers (and any other person who decides to make use of Theatre of the Oppressed practices) should not lose sight of how the practice was created and what function it is intended to serve.

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<sup>55</sup> Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, "The Dynamics of Modes of Production and Social Orders," *Actuel Marx*, vol. no 52, no. 2, (2012):130-148.

<sup>56</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (Theatre Communications Group; New York City, 1985): 166.

Given Britto's extensive experience with Theatre of the Oppressed, along with his social identity/background (Britto identifies himself as Caucasian and heterosexual), he can potentially provide a unique view on Weinblatt and Harrison's Theatre of the Oppressor. In an interview that Britto gave back in 2017, he discussed some of the considerations that he believes Jokers need to be mindful of when altering aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed. In particular, Britto addressed the growing uncertainty around what exactly can and cannot be modified within the theatrical praxis. Britto maintains that because Boal is no longer able to answer this question conclusively, it is something that the Theatre of the Oppressed community will have to figure out collectively through discussions and practical exploration. Additionally, Britto also spoke about the difficulty of supporting Jokers who predominately work with social or ethnic groups that they identify with, while also continuing to lead workshops himself, explaining that:

Can I do Theatre of the Oppressed work or not? Because I think you have these beautiful and wonderful movements now: women, black people, minorities.

Sometimes I think you have two sides. Sometimes it's only the black women who can work with black women. Or only the gay people who can work with gay people. But what is the limit of this? Because if I am going to think like this; If I go to try it, I won't work anymore because I'm a white guy, I'm heterosexual and middle class. Of course, you can listen; you need to listen. I think it's important, this dialogue.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Geo Britto, "CTO Rio: Given a Recipe, You Can Go and Do," in *Theatre of the Oppressed in Practice Today: An Introduction to the Work and Principles of Augusto Boal*, interview with Ali Campbell (Bloomsbury Publishing; New York City, 2019): 180-186.

Britto's frank admittance that he is unsure how to navigate this critical component of Theatre of the Oppressed is revealing for two reasons. First, it highlights that the issue of privilege that Weinblatt and Harrison are attempting to address with their Theatre of the Oppressor is something that Jokers across the globe have difficulty resolving. This problem is not merely confined to more affluent regions, like the United States and Europe, but also appears in countries where there is a considerable amount of inequality, such as Brazil. Secondly, Britto's reference to an ongoing dialogue within the Theatre of the Oppressed community provides an alternative take on the discussion that is taking place between Weinblatt/Harrison and Cañas. Instead of viewing their disagreement around modifying Boal's practices as something negative, it can be seen as an uncomfortable but necessary discussion. In other words, Britto's statement suggests that these types of conversations could potentially strengthen the theatrical movement and help it to remain pertinent in the future.

Another longtime member of CTO Rio, Bárbara Santos, has also written extensively about the ongoing development and modification of Theatre of the Oppressed practices. Santos was born in Brazil and was initially a sociologist/educator before she was introduced to the work of Augusto Boal (she started using his methods to help her students discuss complex issues, such as teen pregnancy and drug use). After becoming captivated with Theatre of the Oppressed, Santos became a full-time member of CTO Rio in the early 1990s. During her first few years with the company, Santos helped Boal during his run for city councilor. She also played an integral part in implementing his Legislative Theatre initiatives after he got elected. While Santos served with CTO Rio for many years and eventually became a coordinator, her recent focus has been on her work

with Kuringa, a Berlin-based theatre company that she co-founded and currently heads as artistic director. Like CTO Rio (and Jana Sanskriti), Kuringa is a dedicated Theatre of the Oppressed center that supports smaller theatre groups/projects and provides training for new Jokers. It also functions as a laboratory space where Boal's theories can be explored through practice and where people can discuss the movement's ongoing methodological development.

Santos is also known for her work with Feminist Theatre of the Oppressed, an emergent approach to Augusto Boal's praxis that approaches his exercises from a feminist perspective. This modification of Theatre of the Oppressed seeks to foreground women in performances to showcase better the oppression they endure.<sup>58</sup> However, while Santos feels it is vital that women give their testimonies, her primary objective with this approach is to investigate the more extensive mechanisms of systemic oppression. That is to say, rather than focusing solely on the individual women in Theatre of the Oppressed performances, a greater emphasis is placed on their collective capacity to affect change. The initiative is also used to help develop more women facilitators. For this reason, as part of her support for Feminist Theatre of the Oppressed, Santos also oversees the Magdalena International Network, a collective of theatre groups that forward Feminist Theatre of the Oppressed.

While Santos's work has differed from Weinblatt's and Harrison's in many regards, one commonality is their attitude towards modifying Augusto Boal's methods. Specifically, these artists have altered aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed to ensure they

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<sup>58</sup> Bárbara Santos, "Interview with Bárbara Santos," interview with Robert Klement, Red Beet - Free to Tell: Systemic Advice & Systemic Theater, September 2013, <https://www.rote-ruebe.eu/rote-r%C3%BCbe-1/interviews/barbara-santos/>.



are more applicable to new situations and a range of participants. Like Weinblatt and Harrison, Santos believes that although it is critical to keep Boal's basic principles in mind when facilitating Theatre of the Oppressed workshops, it is also essential for practitioners to continue improving the praxis. Moreover, she maintains that this is precisely what Boal intended. In an interview that Santos gave with TONYC in 2021, she elaborated on this point, explaining that:

Boal used to say, "That a multiplication has to be creative. Because if the multiplication will not be creative, we will be a copy. And the copy is less than the original." So, if you want to be a copy, you'll be less. You have to be creative. You have to look around. To see what the challenge is here...I am completely in favor, that inside of a situation, a group of people develop something from their own perspective to attend a necessity. Boal also used to say, "The technique is not to adapt people for the technique; it's the other way. The technique has to be adapted for the people's necessity."<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, Santos also maintains that it is critical in workshops to address the issue of privilege and how one's social positionality (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity, profession, etc.) can significantly influence performances.<sup>60</sup> In a similar manner to Weinblatt and Harrison, Santos has altered Forum theatre to avoid having privileged participants replace

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<sup>59</sup> Bárbara Santos, "Bárbara Santos Interview," interview with Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, March 10, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/theatreoftheoppressednyc/videos/257241039226833>.

<sup>60</sup> Bárbara Santos, "What Know for Theatre of the Oppressed? Bárbara Santos, Kuringa." interview by Adrian Jackson, Cardboard Citizens, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2bVsb3GQko>.

marginalized people on stage. Instead, she asks them to serve as an ally and contemplate ways to advocate for social change with those who are genuinely oppressed.

### Formaat

Formaat is a Dutch organization founded in 1999 by Luc Opdebeeck and his partner Irma Hazeleger, focusing on theatre for social change. Opdebeeck and his colleagues have used Theatre of the Oppressed and other forms of participatory theatre to help disadvantaged people living in the country fight against societal barriers and devise strategies to improve their lives. While the company has worked across the Netherlands, it has primarily operated out of the densely populated city of Rotterdam (which has a great deal of social and economic inequality) since 2007.<sup>61</sup> Like many other theatrical organizations discussed in this thesis, Formaat has also utilized Theatre of the Oppressed practices to connect people with different experiences and viewpoints so they can create an ongoing dialogue with one another. In particular, the company's productions have gravitated towards two of the most controversial issues currently taking place in Europe: racial discrimination and the polarization around immigration. Additionally, Formaat has also developed Theatre of the Oppressed methodologies to address other pressing issues within the Netherlands, such as drug addiction, welfare reform, poverty, and mental health problems.

In a similar fashion to Weinblatt and Harrison's Theatre of the Oppressor, Formaat's 2014 - 2015 production *Bridging the Divide* attempted to link people from various backgrounds (e.g., people who can be classified as either vulnerable or non-

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<sup>61</sup> Zinweb, "Luc Opdebeeck Stitching Format," April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018, 6:39, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZsih\\_70YTE&t=206s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZsih_70YTE&t=206s).

vulnerable) through Theatre of the Oppressed exercises. More specifically, the production was designed to stimulate dialogue between disparate communities in Western and Sothern Rotterdam, areas of the city with significant tension resulting from the residents' wide range of socioeconomic status and ethnic identities. *Bridging the Divide* began as two separate performances, each devised and performed by the different districts. The production culminated in a final show where issues raised by both ensembles were discussed and analyzed together. *Bridging the Divide* brought attention to the ongoing issue of discrimination, which disproportionately affects marginalized communities in the Netherlands; the show highlighted the pressing need for people to confront both overt and subtle prejudices they witness, regardless of whether it affects them on a personal level.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, the show discussed the negative stereotypes that are have become commonly associated with immigrants living in Europe and how failing to speak out against discrimination helps perpetuate these dangerous misconceptions. Much like Theatre of the Oppressor, *Bridging the Divide* supports the belief that privileged individuals are an instrumental component for creating broad and sustained structural changes within society.

Outside of *Bridging the Divide*, Opdebeeck's other projects with Formaat provide additional perspective on Weinblatt and Harrison's work with the Mandala Center for Change. In an interview he gave last year with Adrian Jackson (the current artistic director of Cardboard Citizens), Opdebeeck addressed how he has approached facilitating Theatre of the Oppressed workshops given his European heritage and the privileged position he holds as an artistic director. Specifically, he discussed how he was recently

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<sup>62</sup> Formaat231, "Over de Brug/Bridging the Divide," March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 11:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qE9aC1HJ6k0>.

invited to lead a Theatre of the Oppressed program by ArtLab, an arts and culture organization, in Paramaribo, Suriname (a small country in South America). Opdebeeck was initially trepidatious about conducting the workshop, as most of the participants he was working with had African, Indian, or Indigenous ancestry. Given the fact that Suriname was formally a Dutch colony, and has been shaped immensely by its long history of slavery and indentured servitude, Opdebeeck believed that it was paramount for him to be cognizant of this power imbalance and to address it with the workshop participants before they began the training. He explained that the acknowledgment of his privilege was a challenging but necessary "...part of the dialogue we had. That my perspective was a white perspective."<sup>63</sup> Further on in the interview, Opdebeeck and Jackson also discussed how critical it is for Jokers to be mindful of how they both intentionally and unintentionally influence Theatre of the Oppressed performances, regardless of their ethnic or social background. They also pointed out that Boal himself contended with similar issues throughout his theatrical career (again, Boal possessed European ancestry, was college-educated, and towards the end of his life, upper class) and that the recognition of one's advantages has always been an integral component of Theatre of the Oppressed. In many ways, this contradicts the notion that only the truly oppressed can help themselves and others out of oppression. It also elucidates that while Boal was indeed persecuted throughout his life, it was because of his theatre and political work, not because of his ethnicity or social class. However, at the same time, their discussion draws attention to some of the flaws inherent within the Joker system; while a

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<sup>63</sup> Luc Opdebeeck, "What Now for Theatre of the Oppressed? Luc Opdebeeck," interview by Adrian Jackson, Cardboard Citizens, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQioRj1-sDw>.

facilitator can be more or less collaborative, it will always be difficult for them to be genuinely on the same level as the participants they are leading.

Given Opdebeeck's years of experience working with Augusto Boal's methods, he has a great deal of insight into the amount of license that Jokers have in both employing and adapting these exercises. In an interview he gave with Robert Klement back in 2014, along with Thamar Kemperman (a collaborator of Opdebeeck's and fellow Theatre of Oppressed practitioner), he described how newer generations of Jokers often question whether they are facilitating workshops properly. As a result, they come to him for advice on the topic. Opdebeeck explained that this is not a new phenomenon and that even Jokers who trained directly with Boal, such as himself, had similar reservations when they first started leading workshops. He then described some conversations he had with Boal when he was younger about the insecurity he felt in implementing his Theatre of the Oppressed exercises, recounting that:

I remember me asking Boal questions like, "Can I do this? Can I do that?" The same way there are now young practitioners asking me, "Can I do this? Can I do that?" Boal always responded to me: "Why do you ask me questions about stuff that you already do?" I mean, if you call your center "Center of Theatre of the Oppressed," you already are a "Center of Theatre of the Oppressed." I think the road to become a joker is a very uncertain road. You don't know what you're going to bump into. And that's part of becoming a Joker.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Luc Opdebeeck and Thamar Kemperman, "Interview with Luc Opdebeeck and Thamar Kemperman," interview by Robert Klement, Rote Rübe, February, 2014, <https://www.rote-ruebe.eu/rote-r%C3%BCbe/interviews/luc-opdebeeck-and-thamar-kemperman/>.

Later in the discussion, Opdebeeck and Kemperman stressed that this sense of insecurity should not be a roadblock for people trying to become Jokers or to continue developing this vital work. In fact, it suggests that a certain amount of uneasiness may be expected of every Joker, as it shows that they are approaching their position and Boal's theories with a necessary level of respect. Furthermore, while the entirety of the interview between Opdebeeck and Kemperman is fascinating in its own right, this particular section is revelatory because it showcases that the concern over altering Boal's practices is not something new; it has been a point of contention within the Theatre of the Oppressed community for decades. It also illustrates that Boal was aware of this issue taking place amongst Jokers, which is why he routinely encouraged them to employ his exercises in a manner they saw most appropriate.

#### Thoughts from Julian Boal

Finally, Augusto Boal's son, Julian Boal, is another person who possesses some profound insight into current Theatre of the Oppressed practices. Like his father, Boal is a theatre practitioner, playwright, and educator (he is currently the pedagogical coordinator at Escola de Teatre Popular in Rio de Janeiro, which he co-founded with Geo Britto). He has also been instrumental in furthering Theatre of the Oppressed both in Brazil and internationally; throughout the past few years, Boal has routinely facilitated workshops in his native country and abroad, in addition to lecturing at various Theatre of the Oppressed conferences.<sup>65</sup> In an interview Boal gave with Toby Emert and Ellie Friedland back in

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<sup>65</sup> Julian Boal, "Theatre for a "Reality that itself is Contradictory: An Interview with Julian Boal about La Escola De Teatro Popular," interview by Kelly Howe, *Theatre Topics* 29, no. 3 (2019), 241-249. <https://search-proquest.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/docview/2321165664?accountid=14698&pq-origsite=primo>.

2011, he provided many telling responses on the current state of Theatre of the Oppressed. In particular, he addressed some of the controversial issues he has seen with how his father's methods are being employed, many of which relate to the potential benefits and dangers regarding Weinblatt and Harrison's Theatre of the Oppressor.

Early in the interview, Boal reiterated that the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed in Theatre of the Oppressed exercises (and society in general) has always been defined by inequality; one group receives a benefit while the other does not (and often at their detriment). Therefore, he argues that it is challenging to have a reciprocal dialogue between the two, irrespective of the facilitator's and participants' intentions. Shortly after that, though, Boal also maintained that the distinction between the groups has grown increasingly complicated, stating that, "We each belong to many social groups; in some we are oppressed, and in others we are the oppressors."<sup>66</sup> Moreover, much like Weinblatt and Harrison, Boal also supports the idea that overcoming structural discrimination requires solidarity from a broad spectrum of people, explaining that "... so we need to understand that systems of oppression are more than bad actions done by single individuals. Similarly, we can only end oppression collectively, as movements. We can't stress only the individual level, although this is what often happens." Boal's declaration illustrates that other practitioners in the Theatre of the Oppressed community, apart from Weinblatt and Harrison, believe that impactful and sustained changes require a cooperative approach that includes many sectors of society. While many people advocate for a more traditional interpretation of Boal's praxis, there

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<sup>66</sup> Toby Emert, Ellie Friedland, and Julian Boal, "Considering the Future of Theatre of the Oppressed: An Interview with Julian Boal," in *Come Closer: Critical Perspective on Theatre of the Oppressed*, (New York City, New York; Peter Lang Publishing, 2011): 173-185.

is a substantial number of Jokers who do not think it has to be a zero-sum game. Instead, they believe it is possible for both the oppressed and oppressors to gain something from Theatre of the Oppressed exercises without relying on conflict; the oppressed learn that they have the capacity to better their lives, while the oppressors are shown how to create a more equitable world.

In the same interview with Emert and Friedland, Boal also considered the progression of Theatre of the Oppressed in recent years and how it is being applied in different contexts. Although Boal does not think of himself as a steward of his father's methodologies, he does believe that those who employ them must keep in mind that the ultimate goal of Theatre of the Oppressed is the liberation of disenfranchised people. As a result of Boal's extensive work in Brazil and abroad (along with his continual exposure to his father's methods as a young child), he has witnessed a tremendous amount of Theatre of the Oppressed performances. Although he tries to avoid passing judgment on whether these workshops are facilitated correctly or not, Boal does take umbrage with how some of these performances lose sight of the fact that they are supposed to generate dialogue. Specifically, Boal believes that sometimes these exercises become too prescriptive, arguing that:

My father created a system that is very open and dialectical. Many people are using his work all across the world, which is a very good thing. So there is great latitude and there are many stretchings, really big stretchings, but some are stretching it so much that I think it is no longer Theatre of the Oppressed. I think it is role-playing when it only becomes about how to react in certain



situations...dealing only with the consequences, but not with the systems that construct those oppressions.<sup>67</sup>

In short, Boal is stressing that regardless of what specific alterations are undertaken within Theatre of Oppressed exercises, the emancipatory intent of the praxis has to remain intact. That is to say, the ultimate purpose of the theatrical movement is to change oppressive social and political structures. In terms of Weinblatt and Harrison's Theatre of the Oppressor, his statement points to both the potentially harmful and constructive components within this modification of his father's methods. On the one hand, Boal indicates that adaptations of Theatre of the Oppressed that bend its fundamental principles (such as Weinblatt and Harrison's) are running the risk of supplanting the critical dialogue at the heart of the practice in exchange for prescribed advice or their personal growth. That is to say, rather than exploring the reasons why systemic oppression continues to exist, people at the top (e.g., Jokers, privileged participants) often define the issues and attempt to provide participants and audiences with overly simplistic solutions to combat them. However, in this same segment, Boal is also alluding to the possibility that, if done correctly, incorporating people from resourced positions into Theatre of the Oppressed practices may be appropriate in certain circumstances. As long as the performances originate from the oppressed, and they continue to remain the central focus of the exercises, it may be possible for privileged participants to contribute to the dialogic exchange (so long as they do not silence a marginalized person's opinion or

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<sup>67</sup> Toby Emert, Ellie Friedland, and Julian Boal, "Considering the Future of Theatre of the Oppressed: An Interview with Julian Boal," *Come Closer: Critical Perspective on Theatre of the Oppressed*, (New York City, New York; Peter Lang Publishing, 2011): 173-185.

overly shape it).

Recently, in discussion with Cardboard Citizen's Adrian Jackson, Boal spoke again about this topic. He began by detailing how he characterizes the oppressor in Theatre of the Oppressed workshops and the role he thinks that they should play. For Boal, when he speaks about oppressors, he uses the term in a more traditional sense. He believes that this designation should not be used to describe people who come from resourced positions and are attempting to be allies, but rather for those individuals who are indeed antagonists (e.g., abusers, racist cops, corrupt politicians). In Boal's opinion, when actual oppressors are incorporated into Theatre of the Oppressed practices (versus oppressed people or allies portraying them), the focus often changes from combating structural oppression to compelling an individual to change. He contends that while it often feels cathartic to confront the oppressor in this manner, it is an unproductive tactic because it does little to change the system itself, maintaining that:

I'm not denying that it has its place. From time to time, to be able to speak truth to power and stuff like this, it is important. But if that is the only scope, if that is the only frame you give, it simplifies the question....it's not about convincing people, it's about creating power in order to have a counterpart.<sup>68</sup>

In many ways, Boal is making a similar argument to one Cañas has presented against Weinblatt and Harrison's Theatre of the Oppressor. In short, he believes that marginalized people will only gain genuine equality through their collective work and self-advocacy, not by trying to convince oppressors that they are in the wrong and need to

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<sup>68</sup> Julian Boal, "What Now for Theatre of the Oppressed? Julian Boal," interview with Adrian Jackson, Cardboard Citizens; July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRLqMsdCH2w&t=207s>.

change their actions. Additionally, in this discussion with Jackson, Boal again addressed what he believes dialogue is supposed to mean in Theatre of the Oppressed practices. Specifically, he reiterated that genuine dialogue typically does not occur between true oppressors and the oppressed, primarily because of the imbalanced power dynamics between them. Instead, Boal argues that it is usually generated through discussions that the oppressed groups have amongst themselves, and it is meant to engender a kind of conscientization within them.

In comparison to Weinblatt and Harrison's Theatre of the Oppressor, the theatrical artists and organizations discussed in this chapter provide markedly different perspectives on maintaining and adapting fundamental components of Boal's methods. Furthermore, although Katy Rubin (with TONYC), Dr. Sanjoy Ganguly (with Jana Sanskriti), Geo Britto and Bárbara Santos (with CTO Rio), Luc Opdebeeck (with Formaart), and Julian Boal (with Escola de Teatre Popular) are working across the world with diverse groups of people, each of them is attempting to address the issue of privilege in their unique way. Collectively, their various approaches towards implementing Theatre of the Oppressed practices present an alternative method for resolving this multifaceted problem in three ways. To begin with, all of them recognize that having diversity amongst Jokers is critical for lessening power dynamics within workshops. Correspondingly, they have all forwarded this initiative by either hiring or supporting/training facilitators from diverse backgrounds. Next, they also showcase that it may be unnecessary to reconceptualize Theatre of the Oppressed methods to tackle the problem of privilege, especially regarding Jokers. Rather than altering Boal's practices, it may be equally effective for Jokers who come from resourced positions to simply be

more transparent and forthright with participants before facilitating any workshop. Finally, they point to the potential of including people and institutions who are typically viewed as oppressors into Theatre of the Oppressed practices without transmuting the essential function of the praxis. Specifically, they speak to the possibility of allowing privileged individuals or organizations to support and contribute to these performances (by listening to their message) rather than having the ability to shape them in any significant way.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has considered a critical argument that is taking place within the Theatre of the Oppressed community concerning the modification of Augusto Boal's practices. Specifically, it has explored an ongoing disagreement regarding repurposing these exercises by including privileged participants as a means to support broad social change. There are some artists, such as Marc Weinblatt and Cheryl Harrison of the Mandala Center for Change, who argue that incorporating these individuals into Theatre of the Oppressed exercises is an effective strategy for helping to eradicate social inequity as it helps to foster allyship. Moreover, they believe that altering Boal's methods ensures that this theatrical praxis continues to remain relevant to a range of different communities by responding to their unique concerns. However, other people in the Theatre of Oppressed community, such as Dr. Tania S. Cañas, contend that this reconceptualization goes against the initial purpose of Boal's methods and could potentially harm the theatrical movement. She believes that by allowing people from a resourced position to inform Theatre of the Oppressed exercises in any way, even if it is minimally, Weinblatt and Harrison are running the risk of decentering the oppressed. Furthermore, Cañas argues that they are also potentially perpetuating the kind of silencing and marginalization Augusto Boal was trying so hard to overcome with his revolutionary theatrical praxis.

As it is unlikely that there will ever be a consensus within the Theatre of the Oppressed community concerning the modification of Boal's methods, this thesis has not sought to answer this incredibly complex issue. Instead, it has attempted to contextualize

the discussion between Weinblatt/Harrison and Cañas in several different ways. First, this thesis has delineated the development of Theatre of the Oppressed to demonstrate that the theatrical praxis was created in a specific political and social milieu that still affects how it is employed to this day. Additionally, it has discussed how these practices have progressed during and after Boal's lifetime to combat many different forms of oppression. Next, this thesis has detailed Weinblatt/Harrison's and Cañas's arguments to determine what they explicitly advocate for in their writings. Additionally, it has considered their texts with Boal's original writings and working methods to ascertain whether Theatre of the Oppressor can be considered a form of appropriation. Finally, this thesis has discussed several leading Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners (and the organizations they have worked with) to investigate how they have adapted Boal's exercises and have dealt with the issue of privilege in their workshops. In doing so, it has also sought to examine if there is indeed a set of best practices for altering Theatre of the Oppressed practices and what kind of considerations facilitators should keep in mind when undertaking this kind of work.

While the argument currently taking place between Weinblatt/Harrison and Cañas may seem problematic on the surface, it is nevertheless productive for the field. While discussions such as these can often be complex and seemingly contentious, they are also indispensable tools for ensuring that theatrical movements such as Theatre of the Oppressed continue to remain relevant today. While these artists may disagree about the precise way Augusto Boal's methods should be employed, each of them is still striving to use theatre to help ameliorate the lives of marginalized people. Moreover, because Boal is no longer alive to answer questions concerning the adaptation of his practices, it is up

to the global Theatre of the Oppressed community to tackle these issues together by continuing to debate with one another and through practical exploration. Perhaps most critically, though, this discussion has significant implications for privileged Jokers, such as Weinblatt and others discussed in this thesis. Not only has it raised questions about how they alter Theatre of the Oppressed methods but also how they lead performances. Principally, it highlights the need for privileged facilitators to be conscious of how their modifications are interpreted by participants and other Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners from economically and socially disadvantaged groups.

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